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DISCOVERING DRAMA

By the Same Author

THE MODERN NOVEL

JANE WELSH AND JANE CARLYLE

DISCOVERING DRAMA



BY *Elizabeth Drew*



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To B. W. D.

*in memory of all the many plays
we have seen together*

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION—THEATRE VERSUS DRAMA	II
I. THE DRAMATIST AS CRAFTSMAN—STAGE TECHNIQUE	16
2. THE GREEKS	40
3. THE ELIZABETHANS	61
4. THE MODERNS	90
5. THE DRAMATIST AS ARTIST—DRAMA AND LIFE	110
6. COMEDY	137
7. TRAGEDY	173
8. POETRY	212
INDEX	247

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INTRODUCTION

THEATRE VERSUS DRAMA

‘THE THEATRE IS A SERPENT that sucks your blood. Until the writer has conquered the playwright in you I shall harass you and curse your plays.’

So writes Chekov to a fellow-dramatist in 1888, and so must any literary artist-playwright echo in any age of theatrical history. For there is a vague but quite positive rivalry between the theatre and literature. It has never been more profound than at present: certainly there can seldom or never have been an age when the theatre has been so arrogant and self-assertive in its relation to literature. ‘The unliterary theatre is the only genuine form of theatrical art’ states Komisarjevsky, and adds that the art of the theatre is an art of actors and directors and not of writers. ‘This book is concerned with the theatre and not with drama—a distinction in terms which I think is clear to all; I understand drama to be a branch of literature’:¹—so echoes one of the latest young enthusiasts.¹ Book after book is published about the art of the theatre, and a leading New York director declares that a week of visiting theatres in Moscow (where he did not understand a word of the language in which the plays were acted) was the most exciting week of theatre-going he had ever known.

¹ *Moscow Rehearsals*. Norris Houghton.

Perhaps, then, this is a good moment to review the whole matter of the drama and the theatre and the relation between them: for it is surely a peculiar suggestion that the stimulus of the theatre should be a thing apart from the plays produced in it, and that the artists of the theatre should be unrelated to the dramatists whose work they are interpreting.

It is true that drama can only exist in a restricted and anaemic way apart from the theatre. As literature it is a mongrel: there is nothing pure about its breeding as there is about the epic or the essay or the lyric. Drama as an art differs from all these in that its medium is different. If we have to define drama it must be as *the creation and representation of life in terms of the theatre*. The medium of literature is words: the medium of drama is the theatre. A good dramatist never forgets this. He knows that though, like the novelist, he is concerned with the telling of a story, unlike the novelist he does not have to make his words bear the full weight of his story. His words have an independent life of their own, it is true, but an incomplete one. They are written in order to be spoken by three-dimensional human figures. Living personality and appearance, voice and silence, gesture and expression, action and pause, grouping and isolation, are the mediums through which he can gain his effects, in addition to what the words say. He can extend his words by every device which his theatre can compass.

But although drama cannot exist fully without the theatre, neither can the theatre exist fully without drama. The enthusiasts for the art of the theatre always point out that the origins of drama were not in literature, but were in action, song and dance: that the actor existed before the script. This is very true. As long as the people who practiced it were in a primitive and savage condition, drama was an affair of action, song and dance, as it still is among primitive

and savage peoples. As soon as civilization and its values spread, drama has always emerged from this embryonic stage, and has always been widened and deepened, and given permanence and strength by the work of the playwright. The theatre, outside ballet and mime, has no life at all without the help of words. The art of drama is the presentation of life in the theatre: the art of the theatre is the presentation of drama. The actor, designer, and even the Great Mogul himself (the producer or director), exist for that end.

The theatre can transport us into a wonderful world. It can ravish the senses with beauty and brilliance of décor and design, with movement and music; above all it can put living human figures before us with all the magic of illusion. But it is only through the words they speak that the illusion is created and sustained: it is only through words that the theatre can move the heart to tears or laughter in any but the crudest and simplest ways; that it can stimulate and excite the mind endlessly with wit and speculation, and set free the human spirit to soar and dream.

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The close inter-coherence of drama and the theatre has a very practical side. It means that the presentation of life which a dramatist can compass is limited to what can be suggested on the stage for which he writes. He can only create such effects as the mechanics of his stage allow, and he will obviously emphasize such effects as the character of his stage favors. Hence a knowledge of the theatre for which he wrote is essential to the true understanding of a dramatist's achievement. Besides this, there is a whole range of technical elements in *all* plays which are concerned with their theatrical medium—with the facts that they are in-

interpreted by living figures on the stage, and that they aim at an immediate collective response from an audience.

The poet and the painter can forget the multitude as they create their work. They can deliberately aim to please an audience fit though few, and be content if they succeed in doing so. Not so the playwright. Because he is an artist, he longs to illuminate life with an intense individual vision: because his medium is the theatre he must do this in such a way that it wins an immediate popular response. Whatever else he may be able to make his work express and reveal, it has got to express and reveal an emotional and intellectual content which can be communicated from moment to moment during the performance of the play *in the theatre*.

Hence Chekov's plea that the playwright shall not conquer the writer. For it is idle to deny that ever since the commercialization of the theatre in Elizabethan times that temptation has been constantly before the dramatist. The level at which a play can be a success in the theatre is a lower creative level than that which satisfies the true artist. A play may be 'good theatre' and very poor drama. Herein lies the root of the eternal struggle between the art of writing and the art of staging, between literature and the theatre. For the men of the theatre, with very few exceptions, and very naturally perhaps, have their eyes and minds fixed always on the immediate theatrical effect of the dramatist's work: they see and think of it in the terms of the theatre in which it must be played. This is an essential part of the dramatist's vision too, but it is not the whole of it. He cannot limit himself to that set of values. For the world of the theatre is essentially an artificial world. It is through and through a world of illusion, a world of pretense, a world of make-believe. And perhaps it is natural that this essential falseness which is inherent in the very nature of its technique, should

extend from its technique to the material on which that technique is used. The very word 'theatrical' implies character, situation and general values which are tainted with falsity, with strain, with stage effectiveness as distinct from genuine reality. And although this is not the whole truth of the matter, there is a great deal of truth in it. Hence the genuine dramatist, though he must base his art on the world of illusion which the theatre creates, cannot limit himself to theatrical values. Though his work is to be interpreted in the theatre, it is life outside the theatre which has inspired him, and of which he wishes to write. The history of drama, therefore, is the history of how every fine dramatist has subdued the terms of the theatre to the terms of drama: how he has managed to say what he wanted to say, through the medium of the particular stage conditions and the particular audience for which he wrote, and has yet managed to write enduring works of art, whose spiritual reality, human truth and formal beauty continue to reverberate through time and space. For 'Remember,' says Chekov again, 'remember that the writers whom we call eternal, or simply good, and who intoxicate us, have one common and very important characteristic: *they get somewhere*, and they summon you there.'

In this book I deal first with the particular world of the playwright, the world of theatrical values and illusion; of the actors, the stage, the audience. Every dramatist is inextricably involved with these values and this world. But he does not want to live there, nor does any lover of drama want him to. He wants to 'get somewhere,' and in the second part of the book I try to show some of the other worlds of art and experience to which dramatists get, and how they get there.

THE DRAMATIST AS CRAFTSMAN

STAGE TECHNIQUE

THE SEAGULL MAY NOT BE Chekov's most perfect play, but in some ways it is his most interesting play. It is so interesting just because of the imperfection of its dramatic form. In it, the dramatist is not completely objective; we hear Chekov's own voice breaking through, giving his own opinions about art and writing (just as in *Hamlet* we think we hear Shakespeare's own voice breaking through, giving his own opinions about drama and life). In the first act of *The Seagull*, Konstantin Treplev urges that the stage is dead: 'We need new forms of expression, and if we cannot have them, we had better have nothing.' But in the last act he has changed: 'I come more and more to the conviction that it is not a question of new and old forms, but that what matters is that a man should write without thinking about forms at all, write because it springs freshly from his soul.'

The more one lives and reads, the more one is brought to this conclusion, yet of all classes of the art of writing, the art of writing for the stage needs, perhaps, the strictest attention to form. Dryden defined drama as 'a just and lively image of human nature, representing its passions and humours, and the changes of fortune to which it is subject,

for the delight and instruction of mankind': but this definition would equally fit the novel or the narrative poem. It quite ignores the essential fact about drama. And that essential fact is that *the medium of drama is the theatre*. However fresh the material which springs from the dramatist's soul, he has got to fashion and mold it, so that he can create its reality, and convey everything he wants to say about it, or imply about it, by means of a stage and actors on it, within the space of two or three hours. Drama is solely concerned with effects which can be presented on the stage with force and precision.

What are these effects and how can they be presented? To answer these questions involves the whole subject of the nature of theatrical art and theatrical craftsmanship. We must examine the contribution of the actor and the contribution of the audience, and the basic elements of the stage technique of the playwright. For in whatever age the dramatist writes, and whatever may be his unique gifts of dramatic genius, he has got to conform to the eternal principles governing stage time and place; he has got to get his play started, and introduce his characters, and convey the story to his hearers; and he has got to sustain the interest of the audience in that story, and keep it moving and the characters alive, by the age-old tricks of suspense and tension, of variety and contrast.

Let us examine, therefore, something of what the theatre demands from the playwright. First of all it is clear that dramatic subject matter must have certain very obvious limitations. A play cannot, for example, deal with the life-history of a group of deaf-mutes: nor can it wander through the memories and reflections of a lifetime, like Proust's *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu*: nor can it create an atmosphere of breathless flight and pursuit, like the film of *The*

Thirty-nine Steps: nor can it include minute psychological analysis, like a Henry James or a Dostoevsky novel. The plays of Jean Jacques Bernard, or Eugene O'Neill's *The Great God Brown* are sufficient proof that the stage is not the place for oversubtle psychology. Characterization is an entirely different thing in drama and in the novel. The story of *Crime and Punishment*, for instance, can be transferred to the stage—and a very fine melodrama it makes, too: but it is impossible to transfer Dostoevsky's figure of Raskolnikov to the stage. That figure, as we know it in the novel, is the accumulation of a vast number of subtle touches—of watching Raskolnikov's reaction to a vast number of different stimuli; of patient, searching analysis and discussion of his mind and his emotions. In the theatre he must be simplified into something quite different. Indeed, for telling a story vividly, the cinema has infinitely greater scope than the drama, and for psychological interest the novel is far wider and deeper. The drama, however, has one unique asset—its directness and intensity of interest. It is interpreted by living human beings directly to other living human beings; and that fact dominates all else in dramatic method. To read a play, simply as a piece of writing, is like playing a trio for piano, violin and cello on the piano alone.

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A play is interpreted by actors. We speak sometimes of an actor 'creating' a part. This is not strictly true (except in the case of Charlie Chaplin's tramp). What an actor 'creates' is an illusion in the mind of the audience. It is the playwright who creates the character in his lines. The art of acting is the revelation of drama in terms of flesh and blood. All the idealism of a Stanislavsky, the realism of a Duse, the magnet-

ism of a Bernhardt, come down to that. The actor, however much he may exploit his own personality, is a physical medium for the dramatist's thought and emotion. He is a vehicle for that creation of illusion which is the essence of dramatic art, and the greatest actor is he who can so command and use his physical presence—his voice, his limbs, his features, his personal magnetism—that he can hypnotize the audience into the belief that he *is* the character. This a fine actor can do with a perfectly uncanny and astounding talent. He can compel the audience to believe that the thought and emotion he is interpreting are in reality his own, and it is perfectly possible for the actor to do this when as a matter of fact he knows about as much about genuine thought and emotion as a mule about marriage. This is not, of course, to say that many actors and actresses are not people of great culture and intelligence, but simply to emphasize that acting from first to last is a matter of working upon the minds of an audience, and hence to illustrate the supreme importance to drama of the audience.

One critic goes so far as to say 'the drama has no meaning except in relation to an audience,' which seems to me nonsense. It is an absurd overstatement. Mr. George Jean Nathan, on the other hand, declares that the audience is no more present as an important factor in the dramatist's mind when he is creating, than it is in the musician's mind. He points out that a concerto is written to be played by human actors before an audience of human beings, in just the same way in which a play is written to be played by human performers before an audience of human beings, but that no one argues that the question of crowd psychology is involved in musical composition. This does not, however, seem to me a just parallel. What makes the audience of such importance to the dramatist is simply that his artistic material is human

life, the physical, emotional and intellectual experience of human beings. It is inevitable that the audience should feel themselves involved in this in an intimate way quite different from the way in which they are involved in a musical experience. Inevitably the development of the story, and the interrelationship of the characters and the action on the stage, are accompanied by the deepening of the interest, curiosity and suspense of the audience, so that their emotions, both individual and collective, seem to merge in some way with the actors upon the stage, and to play a real part in the total effect. They take a hand in the game. And since the dramatist writes with the consciousness of the stage ever present in his mind, this collaborative power of the audience is a very real factor to him. We have already suggested, indeed, what a temptation it is to the playwright to consider it far too much, and to confine himself to effects which shall make an easy appeal to the 'unskillful' many, instead of aiming at the approbation of the 'judicious' few. This popular element is a quality inherent in dramatic art which makes for a certain ingrained crudity and primitiveness in dramatic appeal, but the true dramatic artist, while he inevitably includes it in his creative vision, is never bounded by it. His aim is not to bring life to the level of his audience, but to make them see it in the terms of *his* vision: he does not aim to reduce experience to what is immediately effective on the stage, but to make the stage somehow adapt itself to the revelation of his experience, to what springs freshly from his soul.

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But as we have said, whatever gifts of creative genius the great dramatist brings to his art, there are certain basic ele-

ments in the writing of plays which no fine dramatist can ignore, because he cannot ignore that plays must be performed in a theatre, by actors, before an audience.

The first of these elements is, perhaps, the factor of *time*. Except in those countries where plays can last all day, the playwright has got to compress everything he has to say into a form which will not take longer than from two to three hours to present upon the stage. The whole subject of 'dramatic time' is a fascinating aspect of dramatic technique. Actual intervals of time can, of course, be easily suggested by the division into acts and scenes, but the creation of a *sense of time* is one of the secrets of dramatic art. A play can leave one almost breathless with the rush and swirl of swift action, or it can create a feeling of having been slowly immersed in its subject matter for years. Compare, for example, the first two acts of *Macbeth* with the first two acts of Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman*. In one we live vividly, palpitatingly, in the 'dramatic present,' hurried from moment to moment with mounting excitement: in the other we sink gradually into the past until the eddies of twenty years have ringed themselves round us, and become an organic part of the present action in our minds. Or a play may really cover many years, of which we have no consciousness at all, as in *Antony and Cleopatra*, while in another, as in the last scene of *Dr. Faustus*, we have no sensation except that of the relentless peeling away of those last shreds of moments which separate time from eternity.

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The sort of action which is capable of being transferred to the stage must, therefore, be of the kind with which dramatic time and dramatic space can cope: it must be capable

of being created in a theatre within the limits of a theatrical performance.

The next problem for the playwright is to get his action started. How soon he can get it under way, as it were, will depend largely on how much knowledge he can presuppose in his audience of the story and characters which are his material. The Greeks, for example, were already familiar with the myths of their gods and heroes, and very little introduction was necessary to orient the minds of the audience to the particular starting point in a story which the dramatist had chosen. Moreover, if it be clear at once that the play is of a definite *genre* where the type of its characters can be taken for granted; if, for example, it is an artificial comedy, like *The Way of the World*, or a farcical comedy like *Hay Fever*, or a domestic romp like *The Taming of the Shrew*, the playwright can launch into his fable without having to 'plant' the characters in any precise way. Any necessary detail can be filled in in the early course of events. Another practical point concerning the opening of a play is the behavior of the human material in the audience which has to be dominated by the playwright. The Greek audience was attuned to a religious ceremony; the play could open very slowly and quietly, its early scenes almost static. The Elizabethan audience of the public theatres was completely different. A large section of it was probably a noisy rabble, and must be startled into silence, or their attention caught by vivid action or words: while the modern audience is largely a minus quantity when the play opens, and the efforts of the dramatists are directed towards making the characters do and say nothing of any importance or distinction during the first ten minutes of the performance, until the late comers shall have stumbled darkly into their seats.

The amount of preparation for the start of the action also

depends on the conventions which the audience of the day is willing to accept in the theatre. The Greeks were prepared to listen to a long prologue, quite external to the action of the play, which frequently explained not only the condition of affairs at the opening of the action, but also precisely what was going to happen during the course of the action itself. Shakespeare prepares the ground in much the same way in *Troilus and Cressida*, with a Prologue which declares,

Hither am I come . . .
To tell you, fair beholders, that our play
Leaps o'er the vaunt and firstlings of these broils
Beginning in the middle; starting thence away
To what may be digested in a play.

And any Elizabethan, like Shakespeare in *The Tempest*, will, if it suit his purpose, make his audience familiar with material necessary to their understanding of the action in the most crude and direct fashion without troubling at all about dramatic verisimilitude.

The coming of realism in the theatre changed all that. The aim of realists was to make the audience forget that they were in a theatre listening to a play, that they were spectators of an art, based, like all other arts, on the acceptance of illusion. The realists determined at all costs to make the necessary exposition seem a natural part of the action of the drama. As a result, the opening scene of servants gossiping about the affairs of their employers became almost as much a convention as the Greek prologue, and in the present day the telephone has become a kind of symbolic lay figure which receives all sorts of revealing confidences intended for the audience. It is still the fashion in books about dramatic technique to extol the opening of *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray* as a masterpiece of realistic exposition—a scene in which two characters are merely stuffed shirts whose bosoms

must receive the life story of Aubrey Tanqueray's first marriage, and in which the hero, the host at a dinner party in his own house, leaves his guests not once only, but twice in a single scene, on the dear old plea of writing some letters in the next room, in order to leave the coast clear for his friends to discuss the matter without him! How, one wonders, would Ibsen have treated the revelation of Aubrey's past in that scene? For Ibsen is the outstanding example of a real artist in naturalistic exposition, and his first acts are sometimes miracles of ingenuity. But even he sometimes lapses. When Mrs. Linden, in *The Doll's House*, is examined closely, for instance, she is found to be perilously like the 'confidante in white linen' of an earlier age. It is, to say the least of it, very opportune that she should turn up to see Nora just at that time. If we compare that scene with the first scene of *The Wild Duck*, or of *Ghosts*, or of *Hedda Gabler*, we can see the difference between mere theatrical ingenuity, and the organic interdependence of characters and action welding dramatic material into one living action. In all of these, there is no narrative explanation at all; it is the essence of the dramatic method as described by Henry James: 'Presented episodes, architecturally combined, and each making a piece of the building; with no going behind, no *telling about* the figures save by their own appearance and action, and with the explanation of everything by all the other things in the picture.'

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Once the dramatist has launched his action, his whole problem is to sustain the interest of the audience in it. That interest must never flag; the donkey must be stretching out his neck to the carrot all the time. This does not mean that

a play has to be full of actual swiftly moving events. That is one way of holding attention in the theatre, but it is a very crude one. Shakespeare, says Granville Barker, as he traces the development of Shakespeare's genius, soon made a 'capital discovery,' the discovery that physical action in itself and by itself is the least effective thing upon the stage.

You may kill a man or kiss a woman, and whatever the interest in this, it is over in a moment. The why and the wherefore, what went before and what is to come after, those are what count. They are the fruitful stuff of drama.

It is obvious, therefore, that the 'action' of a play is not only its course of external events, but is everything and anything in it which builds up dramatic situation and dramatic movement. Silence can be as powerful an element in it as speech. In *Hedda Gabler*, for instance, the fact that Hedda says nothing about her possession of Lovborg's manuscript when he comes to confess his loss, works in the mind of the audience during the whole course of the scene until his declaration that he is going to kill himself; and stands almost like a tangible figure beside Hedda as she deliberately hands him the pistol. Or again, an implication can set the mind of the audience racing as excitedly as any event. In *Rosmersholm*, when Kroll accuses Rebecca of being the illegitimate child of Dr. West, she is terribly moved—unreasonably so, as Kroll himself thinks. Then suddenly the mind of the audience is aware of the truth. The vague secret in Rebecca's past is that she had been Dr. West's mistress. It is never said, but that very fact makes the impression far more powerful, as we feel Rebecca's instinctive recoil of horror from the knowledge of her unconscious incest.

Or the dramatic movement of a play may be almost entirely in its emotional elements. In *The Trojan Women*, there are no events worth speaking of at all; the dramatic rhythm ex-

presses itself in wave after wave of sheer human suffering. The interest is simply in the variety, intensity and vividness of that pain. Or again, in a play such as Schnitzler's *Dr. Bernhardt*, we see how ideas—an activity created in the mind alone—can be quite as exciting as any other kind of action. Here the conversations between Bernhardt and Flint, the doctor turned politician, and between Bernhardt and the priest after the trial, with its searching analysis of the opposition between Catholic and human truth, are two of the most absorbing scenes of the play: while the whole of the second act is a committee-meeting of men, in which the sole topic of conversation is the question of principle versus politics. Euripides' *Orestes* is another play where long intellectual debates form a most lively part of the action, and Shaw's *St. Joan* is a further illustration of how action generated in the mind of the spectators can compete with and dominate the interest in the flow of external events. In *Rosmersholm*, again, we see a great artist quite deliberately turning his back on an obvious dramatic situation for more 'fruitful stuff.' The clear theatrical story in the material is the realization by Beata of the love between her husband and Rebecca West, working up to her ultimate suicide at the insidious instigations of Rebecca. It needed an Ibsen to place the starting point of his story some years after that episode, and to see the intensities and subtleties of dramatic action which could be evoked from the psychological recoil and reverberation of that crime.

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The only essential of dramatic action is that it should have *movement*, that it should create a *progression* in the mind of the audience. For that reason, the static elements in drama should never for long usurp the stage to the exclusion of the

dynamic time sequence. And it is because this is what happens in the great third act of *King Lear* that I cannot help thinking Lamb was right in declaring that that play loses by being represented in a theatre. Granville Barker has made a most stimulating and challenging study of Shakespeare's stagecraft in it¹ which is entirely convincing to read, but which simply does not work in practice when the act is being played. One is then quite unaware of all the subtleties of action which he points out. They are real enough to the reader, but the theatre is not the place for minute psychological detail: it cannot 'come over,' and we are conscious all the time of the lack of *forward movement*. To live in the mind of Lear is not enough to sustain the interest in the theatre, though it provides some of the most magnificent poetry in the world.

The same criticism applies to many of the modern experiments in dramatic form. To Auden and Isherwood's *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, for example, where the movement is that of a choppy sea; a motion giving an impression of activity and progress, with no underlying impulsion of the imagination: movement without direction. Or to Toller's *Masses and Man*, where there is a succession of argument and symbol, symbol and argument, both equally abstract and static, which create no more suspense in the mind of the audience than, say, a platform speech on the same subject.

§

It used to be considered essential by dramatic theorists that the movement which is so important to the interest of a play should be built into some sort of central *conflict* which formed the heart and soul of the dramatic experience. But

¹ *Prefaces to Shakespeare*. First Series.

this is an exaggeration. The plays of Chekov alone are enough to prove that it is quite unnecessary to have any obvious conflict and struggle, involving a crisis and a catastrophe, such as was the rule in classical drama. But since the basis of all enjoyable dramatic experience is the emergence of character in action, it is, I think, impossible to have drama unless the characters are concerned in some kind of complication, which must necessarily involve some kind of clash between individuals, or between opposing emotions or circumstances or ideas. It may be an opposition between individuals, between Jason and Medea, or Othello and Iago, or Mio and Judge Gaunt and Trock Estrella in *Winterset*; or between character and environment as in *The Three Sisters* or *Justice* or *Awake and Sing*; or between different elements of one human being, as in *Macbeth*; or all these opposites may be involved together, as in *Hamlet*. There may be a collision of will and purpose, as in *St. Joan*; or of one sort of life with another sort of life, as in *Hay Fever*; or of mere facts with other facts, as in *The Way of the World*; or of facts at war with theories, as in *The Wild Duck* or *Strange Interlude*; or of vitality at war with mechanism, as in *The Adding Machine*.

This clash, whatever form it may take, creates the plot of the play, and it used again to be an axiom of the theorists that the plot of a play must have a unity, welded from a beginning, a middle and an end. But this again is too rigid a concept. The unity of a play, as we shall see later, can be of various kinds, simple or complex. It is true that nothing can replace the particular strength which springs from a living, organically articulated body of action. It is the great power of the Greek drama, and creates that peculiarly satisfying sense of assurance which flows from all Greek art. But in any age a finely proportioned plot impresses itself uncon-

sciously as a feeling of the artist's command of his material, a knowledge that we are, as it were, safe in his hands, that he knows his job. A fine plot is not only a good story, it is an interpretation of life. It is the selection and arrangement of a piece of human experience which must inevitably reveal the artist's own sense of proportion and emphasis. It is for this reason that the common lack of it, in modern serious drama, even in plays which have so much else to offer as those of Chekov, is apt to leave the audience vaguely unsatisfied. The argument as to whether plot or character be more important is an old one, and cannot really be settled. Obviously in some plays the plot comes first and has suggested the characters, while in others the characters have suggested the plot. Among contemporary plays which are real works of art, *Awake and Sing* is perhaps the best example of the play whose interest depends on character only, and *Murder in the Cathedral* the best example of that where the predominant interest is in the whole ordering of the action. It is, I think, impossible not to feel that the dramatic experience of the one would have been stronger if it could have achieved a firmer structure of events, and the dramatic experience of the other richer if it could have created a more varied human pattern. Perhaps the testimony of Ibsen, who knit the interests of plot and character more firmly than any other dramatist, is worth something. 'I have just completed a play in five acts,' he writes in a letter: 'that is to say, the rough draft of it. Now comes the elaboration, the more energetic individualization of the persons, and their modes of expression.'

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'The permanent value of a play rests on its characterization,' says the late Professor G. P. Baker, and certainly there

is no real lasting satisfaction in a play of situation unsupported by character. We can see this in all Shakespeare's early comedies, which are the dreariest human documents possible, and live purely by the beauty of their language. However, Shakespeare always does have the enchantment of his poetry to provide an alternative, and it is when nothing else is provided to distract our attention that the hollowness of a play of imperfectly motivated events is so apparent. Take, for example, *The Children's Hour*, by Lillian Hellman, which has proved such a popular theatrical entertainment recently. Here, in the first act, we are shown two active, intelligent, go-ahead young women, who have built up a successful school from nothing, and who understand children; also an up-to-date modern doctor. A trio surely perfectly fitted to cope with a difficult psychological situation. The arising and the exploding of this situation is admirably conceived and dramatized, but now the child's grandmother, whom we are led to suppose suffers only from overfondness for her loathsome grandchild, and is not otherwise mentally deranged, but is, indeed, a person of judgment and wisdom in the ordinary affairs of life, behaves in a quite incredible fashion. After sending for the doctor in a sensible way, she then proceeds to spread the scandalous report, *by telephone*, without waiting for the arrival of the doctor, or for any further evidence whatever. The doctor himself—who has studied at Vienna!—never says a word of psychological common-sense on the matter from beginning to end; and no one makes any effort to discover the truth about the other child who has been terrorized into lying.

In the third act, the two active and energetic young women, having lost the slander action they have brought against the child, have become utter wrecks, with no will, purpose or vitality left: one haunted by a guilt complex because she has

really had the misfortune to be born with a sexual bent towards her own sex—though she has not given way to it—the other splitting emotional hairs with her doctor fiancé about why they can never be happy. Whereas if either of them had shown a tenth of the initiative and sanity necessary to create and run a successful girls' school, the whole silly nonsense would have been hunted out and exposed for what it was twenty-four hours after the charge had been made. To make such a fable acceptable—and one could very easily have believed in its truth—it was essential that it should have been acted out by characters of an entirely different caliber. The characters were interesting characters, but one simply did not believe in them in relation to that particular course of events, interesting though it, too, was.

This meant that the adult-minded playgoer felt balked of what he feels to be his real pleasure in the theatre, the real material of drama—the interrelation of character and action. In this case the characters were too strongly and firmly drawn for the action to sustain them; but they may equally be too uncertainly managed. In real life we are frequently unsure of the motives behind the actions of our fellow human beings, but in a play we must be sure, or the character will become blurred. Unless the dramatist has made his intention unmistakable, the interrelation of plot and character is upset. An illustration of the fatal effects of this blurring occurred in S. N. Behrman's *End of Summer*, where the real character of the doctor was left far too long in suspense. For about two-thirds of the play, the spectator was led to suppose that the doctor was a person on whom he could place reliance, who was, more or less, the mouthpiece of the dramatist; and it was not until the last act that he was revealed as a gold-digging charlatan and impostor. When this revelation came, the result was as great a sense of confusion in the

mind of the audience as in the mind of the heroine—a fatal condition for dramatic enjoyment.

Indeed, the whole creative effort of the dramatist is to merge character and event into one indissoluble 'rightness,' whose clarity and significance are unmistakable. It is no easy task. Shakespeare is continually shocking us by the yawning gaps in his plays between the characters as created by him, and their actions as taken over from some third-rate Italian novello, or bloodthirsty chronicle. Such things as the fable of *All's Well That Ends Well*; the conclusion of *Measure for Measure*; the inconsistencies in the character of Hamlet (which I do not feel argued out of even by Professor Dover Wilson's persuasive eloquence); and above all as the change in Othello from the supreme dignity and noble breeding of his spirit and bearing before the Venetian Senate, to the groveling, foaming beast who is tricked by Iago, or the monster of insulting cruelty who strikes Desdemona and calls her whore in public—are things beyond the belief of any rational theatregoer. The characters outgrow the plot so that they no longer fit it. In modern times Pirandello has illustrated this aspect, as well as others, of the dramatist's dilemma. The whole of *Six Characters in Search of an Author* is a fantastic set of variations on the theme of the difficulties of the creative playwright in his struggle between the apparent reality of the figures his imagination creates, with the pitiful machinery of plot construction, and the crude figures of flesh and blood actors which is all the theatre can provide by way of interpretation.

But in any fine play a unity of impression does come through as we watch it in the theatre, which is the result partly of the large impress of the writer's whole creative quality (which we shall discuss later), but is also built up by his command of concentrated craftsmanship. His aim is to

create the minimum of mere event which in no way reveals character, the minimum of incident which merely reveals character without vitally advancing the plot, and the minimum of 'atmosphere' and of 'ideas' merely for their own sakes. And within this structure the action of the play must be in a constant state of *continuity of movement and interest*. The various ways in which the playwright creates this continuity are the secrets of the art of writing for the stage.

To put it crudely, he has got to keep the consciousness of his audience always reaching forward, even though they may be fascinated by what is immediately before them on the stage: that is, he has got to create the most important individual quality in dramatic art—suspense.

We can see the value of this quality in its practical and simple form in a hundred 'thrillers' on stage and screen, whose interest is really in nothing else. It has the obvious straightforward value of piquing curiosity. This aspect of it is, of course, immensely valuable in all stage technique. Drama is, after all, a species of story-telling: there is always the primitive pleasure of wondering what will happen next. How is Hamlet going to kill the King? Won't Desdemona somehow persuade Othello of her innocence? Will the three sisters ever get to Moscow? Which man is Candida going to choose? The pleasures of curiosity are always an important part of theatrical experience, and there is no dramatic thrill quite the same as seeing a fine play for the first time. We can only once have the experience of relief when we find that Anthony Anderson in *The Devil's Disciple* wasn't a coward when he rushed off on hearing that Dick Dudgeon had been taken prisoner in his place; or of anxiety whether Lopahin will ask Varya to marry him before they are interrupted in their last stifled conversation; or of dismay when Hedda,

seeing Aunt Julia's new hat, exclaims: 'We can't keep that servant. She's left her old bonnet on the chair'; or of the realization of the depths of Hedda's malice when, in the next act, we find that she had said it on purpose. We can only once have the moment of horror when we hear from Rebecca West's lips of the manner of Beata Rosmer's death; or of breathless thrill as the ghost of Banquo appears and Macbeth gasps out, 'Which of you has done this?'

But the pleasures which come from the suspense which is created by our own ignorance of the plot, however intense they may be, are not, in the nature of things, lasting; and the perpetual and inexhaustible pleasures of tension in the theatre are those which spring not from *our* ignorance of the course of events, but from the ignorance of the characters on the stage of things of which we, as audience, are aware. We have this knowledge about the whole play, once it is familiar, and with it comes an immensely increased pleasure in watching the development of the plot and the characters and in marking the dramatic art of the playwright and the skill of the players. But we have it in a particular way in those creations of tension in the audience to which the name of 'dramatic irony' has been given. And the effect of this device is so particularly powerful because it is bound up with that unique element in dramatic art—the participation of the audience in it. It is above all the quality in stage circumstance which binds the audience to the dramatic situation: by it, they become, as it were, superior to the action of the play, they know more than the characters on the stage, they are in the confidence of the dramatist himself. So no familiarity can stale the effect of the scene in the *Medea* between Jason, Medea and the children, when we know that Medea plans to murder the children, while Jason looks forward to their future maturity; or of that moment in

Euripides' *Electra* when Clytemnestra says she will go into the house to see the new baby, 'the Peace-bringer,' and we know that there is no baby, and that Orestes is waiting within to kill her; or the lines where Hamlet apologizes to Laertes for any injury he may have done him, when we know that Laertes has just arranged to use the poisoned foil; or of that passage at the end of *The Wild Duck* where, during the exquisite satiric comedy of Hialmar's incompetent and egotistical preparations for leaving home, and his finally sitting down to a good breakfast, and thinking of no one but himself, we have the knowledge that the shot which they all take so lightly is not old Ekdal pretending to be a sportsman, but Hedvig killing herself because she thinks she is the cause of her father's anger.

§

It is a psychological commonplace that no one can sustain an attitude of high tension for very long at a time, and the art and craft of the playwright is seen further in the skill with which, while never abandoning his continuity of interest, he varies its pace, tone and pitch. Dramatists in all ages have been faced with this psychological necessity, and the weave of a play is, in consequence, of an entirely different texture from the pattern of a novel. Although the time of a play's performance is so short, a play can become monotonous in interest, and an audience bored and restless, with perilous ease. We can spend hours with Proust, reading of the particular symptoms and vagaries of the jealousy of Swann for Odette, but if we had more than about ten minutes at a time of the scenes between Desdemona and Othello, our attention would lose its edge. In *St. Joan*, absorbing though the political and theological discussion is between Warwick

and Cauchon in Warwick's tent, Shaw is careful to interrupt the purely intellectual interest of the argument by that sudden emotional explosion where de Stogumber calls Cauchon traitor, and so breaks the monotony of tone by a moment of violent action. The necessity for 'comic relief' has become a byword, and certainly as far as English-speaking audiences go, we all agree with Dryden: 'A continual gravity keeps the spirit too much bent; we must refresh it sometimes, as we bait in a journey that we may go on with greater ease.'

This demand has given us the many triumphs in dramatic contrast of Shakespeare's plays between emotional tension and laughter; and the brilliant humorous sketches of Ibsen—Engstrand in *Ghosts*, or Falder, the old clerk in *John Gabriel Borkman*. But it is not only in the contrasts between the tragic and the comic that we can study the varied rhythms of dramatic melody. From earliest times this need for variety has been ever present to the dramatist. If, for example, we examine the dramatic texture of the *Libation-Bearers* of Aeschylus, we can see the principle at work. The two single figures of Orestes and Pylades, with which the play opens, are soon joined by the chorus, introducing the theme of lamentation and unrest, and Electra, with her single-minded passionate hate for her father's murderers. So far the action has been static, then the pace quickens, as Electra finds the lock of hair on the altar, and moves swiftly to the discovery scene and the exaltation of the reunion of brother and sister. This is followed by the lyric Invocation, with its medley of the themes of sorrow, pity, hope, hatred and impassioned prayers for revenge. Then Orestes turns to practical plotting, and there follows the dramatic scene of his tricking of Clytemnestra with the story of his own death, and her dissembling grief. The

Nurse and her interlude of comedy interrupts this, and she is again interrupted by the chorus with a song of hope and suspense. Aegisthus comes in, excited at the news of Orestes' death, and goes into the house, where we know Orestes is waiting to kill him. His death cry rings out, and a slave comes rushing from the main door of the palace and beats frenziedly at the gate of the women's quarters. From them comes Clytemnestra, in lonely magnificence and grandeur, and time seems to stand still as she pleads with her son to spare her, and Orestes argues implacably that she must die. As she is driven into the house, the chorus break into a song of triumph that vengeance has been performed and the House purified. But this again is interrupted by Orestes, in no mood of triumph, but growing frantic with horror as he sees the Furies and feels the rising tide of madness drowning all his consciousness.

We find the same care for variation if we examine any successful drama of any age. The playwright must slacken his tension between his moments of greatest excitement, or they will not 'tell'; but he must not slacken it too much, or he will lose his audience. Shakespeare often bridged that difficult gap between crisis and catastrophe by simply changing the emotional tone completely. Thus after the violence of Othello's mad rage, we have the pathos and quietness of Desdemona's preparing for bed: after the storm scenes in *Lear* the gentleness of the heartbreaking reconciliation scene with Cordelia. Places where Shakespeare fails (to a modern audience), and where the relaxation from excitement leaves the tension too slack to bear the interest, are between the end of the Banquet scene in *Macbeth*, and the beginning of the fifth act; and in a good deal of the second and third acts of *Antony and Cleopatra*, where the action becomes so diffused that it is definitely dull. A long-sustained

but triumphant pause is that after the Ghost scene in *Hamlet*. The story stops here completely. First Polonius maunders along to Reynaldo about Laertes in Paris; the dullness of that is mitigated by Ophelia's story of Hamlet's visit to her; and then there is a scene of more bustle and movement, with the King welcoming Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to the Court, and the Ambassadors from Norway transacting their business. Private affairs come to the fore again with Polonius declaring his belief that Hamlet's madness is the result of thwarted love, and the plan that Ophelia shall be 'loosed' to him. Then comes the long conversation between Hamlet and the courtiers, with all its revelation of Hamlet's mood, and its range of subject from a discussion of the universe to the stage squabbles of Elizabethan London. With the entrance of the Players we get another variation in the mere sound of their old-fashioned rhetoric against Shakespeare's own rich dramatic poetry; and when they go out all the emotion which has been held in check for so long gathers itself into a great leap forward and upward into the concentrated energy of the soliloquy 'O what a rogue and peasant slave am I . . .' with the plot to catch the King by means of the play. But although the plot has stood still all this time, there has been a constant variation in subject matter, in emotional coloring, in personnel on the stage, and in the texture of the language.

The same necessity for variety controls the grouping of characters: they must give 'value' to each other. Even the Greeks emphasized the more than life size of the protagonists in their dramas by the introduction of figures from real life—nurses, servants, peasants—who suggested the standard of the familiar. The Elizabethans mingled all classes and callings upon the stage, and again the subject of the value of comic figures in serious plays is an endless

one. But equally memorable effects of grouping are gained among serious characters alone. The figures of Electra, Chrysothemis and Clytemnestra in Sophocles' *Electra* are a wonderful piece of composition; the clear, simple sweetness of the Duchess of Malfi is posed against the subtly distinguished forms of evil in the figures of the Cardinal, Ferdinand and Bosola; the pure idealism of Rosmer is contrasted with the frank opportunism of Mortensgard, the rational detachment of Brendel, and Rebecca West's efforts to force life to fit her own scale of values.

The theatre of each age in dramatic history provides certain particular means for the creation of effects of variety and contrast. The Greeks had the chorus; the Elizabethans all the opportunities for free movement in time and place which they gained from their platform stage, besides the values they could create from their poetry; the moderns the possibilities from their mechanical advances in stagecraft. We shall consider all these things in the subsequent chapters, but enough has been said here to show that there are certain principles in dramatic writing which are eternal. Indeed, as we have seen throughout this chapter, it is as easy to illustrate the basic principles of playwriting from Aeschylus as from Ibsen. Each kind of theatre, Greek, Elizabethan, contemporary, demands certain modifications of technique, and provides certain limitations and certain liberties of its own; but the central dramatic demands of movement, suspense and variety are constant.

2

THE GREEKS

THE GREEK DRAMA IS SO COMPLETELY different in its form and in its aims from any sort of drama with which we are familiar in a modern theatre, that it is very difficult for the modern mind to appreciate it in any vital and unacademic way. A few quotations from the *Fragment of a Greek Tragedy* by the late A. E. Housman will illustrate the sort of thing which interferes with communication between the Greeks and ourselves.

The Chorus greets Alcmaeon.

Cho. O suitably-attired-in-leather boots

Head of a traveller, wherefore seeking whom

Whence by what way how purposed art thou come

To this well-nightingaled vicinity?

Alc. I journeyed hither a Boeotian road.

Cho. Sailing on horseback, or with feet for oars?

Alc. Plying with speed my partnership of legs.

Cho. Beneath a shining or a rainy Zeus?

Alc. Mud's sister, not himself, adorns my shoes.

Cho. To learn your name would not displease me much.

Alc. Not all that men desire do they attain.

Alcmaeon, learning that Eriphyla dwells within, enters the house.

Cho. In speculation

I would not willingly acquire a name

For ill-digested thought;

But after pondering much

To this conclusion I at last have come;
Life is uncertain.
This truth I have written deep
In my reflective midriff
On tablets not of wax,
Nor with a pen did I inscribe it there,
For many reasons; *Life, I say, is not*
A stranger to uncertainty.
Not from the flight of omen-yelling fowls
This fact did I discover,
Nor did the Delphic tripod bark it out,
Nor yet Dodona.
Its native ingenuity sufficed
My self-taught diaphragm.

There follows the Antistrophe and the Epode: then,

Eri. (within). O, I am smitten with a hatchet's jaw;

And that in deed and not in word alone.

Cho. I thought I heard a sound within the house

Unlike the voice of one that jumps for joy.

Eri. He splits my skull, not in a friendly way.

Once more: he purposes to kill me dead.

Cho. I would not be reputed rash, but yet

I doubt if all be gay within the house.

Indeed, when to the difficulty of a strange formal convention is added the difficulty of translation into another language, the wonder is that there is anything there that we can appreciate at all. But the Greek drama, like every other drama, is an expression of the human spirit, and the human spirit does not change. In its essential emotions, it remains the same now as it was twenty-five hundred years ago, and in spite of the differences of background and origin, of civilization and of representation, Greece still possesses more of the supreme dramatic artists of the world than any other nation. The plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides are classics, that is, plays which can safely be praised without having been read, but anyone who does read them

cannot fail to find, with a shock of joyous surprise, that many of them are as fresh and keen-edged in their human implications today, as they were presumably when they were first written. When Medea and Jason wrangle about the differences between men and women, or Admetus reveals the naïve egotism of the natural male: when Iphigenia cries of the agony of exile, or Pylades speaks of the realities of friendship, or Electra of the world's injustice: when Hecuba sings of age and loss, and Andromeda of mother-love: when Agamemnon talks about conquest like Mussolini, or Jocasta about leaving well enough alone like Gina Ekdal, there is certainly nothing musty or antiquated about the Greek drama.

§

It is, of course, quite unnecessary to know anything about the origins of the Greek drama, or about the Greek theatre and its audience, in order to appreciate Greek plays, but it certainly widens our powers of enjoying them if we do, and makes the reasons plain for some of their many apparent absurdities as judged by the standards of the modern stage.

Everybody knows that the drama originated in religious ritual: probably in the union of two kinds of independent ritual. On the one hand there were the fertility rites in connection with the worship of Dionysus, in which the Corn God suffers some form of sacrificial death, followed by a resurrection, while the dithyramb, a hymn accompanied by a dance, was performed in his honor: on the other, there was the ritual and ancient worship of heroes, where the worshipers would dance round the tomb, singing and reciting the story of the dead hero's glorious deeds, and per-

haps impersonating some of them in action, and pleading for his help in the activities of the living. The invocation to Agamemnon in the *Libation-Bearers* is an example of the sort of thing: the chorus of women come in and sing to the dead, and they, and Orestes and Electra retell the story of the murder of Agamemnon and cry savagely to his spirit to aid them in their vengeance on his murderers.

All the elements from both these types of ritual are in the drama as we know it, but whether it came to be called a 'tragedy,' which means 'goat-song,' because the goat was the emblem of fertility, or because the dancers were originally dressed in goat-skins, or because the statue of Dionysus, which was brought at the time of the festival to the place of performance, was draped in goat-skins, we do not know. It seems certain, however, that before the time of Aeschylus, tragedy had come to mean the singing and dancing of a chorus, alternating with interludes in which a single actor assumed a character, delivered a speech in narrative, or conversed with the leader of the chorus. Aeschylus introduced the second actor, and hence made an independent action possible, while Sophocles introduced a third, further widening and enriching the scope of the plot.

The plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and the comedies of Aristophanes, which are the Greek drama as the majority of us know it, were produced during the fifth century B. C. at the festival of Dionysus, at Athens, during the month of March. The occasion combined a great religious festival and a great state function, and the drama partook of both these elements. It was a national holiday, and the audience, which represented the whole of the population, men, women and slaves, came to enjoy itself. But it was not just a holiday show, and the performance had to be

worthy of the worshipers of a great and powerful God, and of the citizens of a great and powerful state.

The festival lasted for three days, and the dramatic entertainments were the entries in a drama contest. The *archon*, or magistrate, selected three poets to compete, and three rich men to provide the expenses of the performance. Each competitor presented four plays, three tragedies and a comedy, all performed on the same day. At the end, a body of five judges, chosen from all sections of the populace, awarded the prizes. Thirty-three of the plays survive: seven by Aeschylus, seven by Sophocles and nineteen by Euripides; but each wrote about a hundred plays in all. We know that Aeschylus was first thirteen times, which means that fifty-two of his plays won the prize; Sophocles won eighteen times, and Euripides only five. Euripides was unlucky in competing so frequently against Sophocles, the public's darling. The Attic audience, too, although an audience of amazing tolerance compared with modern standards, were nevertheless resentful of Euripides' startling innovations in their traditional art form. Their drama was an aspect of their religion, and they disapproved of Euripides' direct and indirect attacks on their traditional objects of worship and their traditional habits of mind. Extant plays in many cases were defeated by those now lost: the *Oedipus Rex*, for example, and the *Medea*. Undoubtedly there was sometimes jobbery and corruption among the judges, and moreover the whole question of production rested largely on the generosity of the *choregus* who was financing the plays. If he were mean and stingy, he might engage inferior actors and choric performers, and economize on the costumes. No doubt in Athens, as elsewhere in time and place, fine plays were often handicapped by inferior acting, and

second-rate ones were acclaimed by reason of the money spent on their production.

We must not imagine the plays of the great Greek dramatists as being performed in the magnificent stone theatre whose ruins are still one of the glories of Athens. That dates from the fourth century, and the theatre of the fifth century had unpretentious wooden seats set in a half circle on the hillside. The circular dancing floor below was backed on one side by a low, narrow stage, behind which was a wooden building where the actors dressed. The *Oresteia* of Aeschylus is the first extant play where this actors' booth is included in the stage as a part of the scenic background. His earlier plays demanded nothing but an open space with a tomb in it, but here the first scene takes place before the palace of Agamemnon, and the last before temples in Delphi and Athens. Interior scenes were suggested by the pushing out of a low platform on wheels, and further indications of scene may have been given by conventional symbols: a dolphin and wavy lines to suggest the sea, a goat and a rock for mountains. The chorus always wore simple tunic and mantle, white or black, though Aeschylus himself designed a special snaky headdress for the Furies, which was alleged to be so 'horrid' that it terrified great numbers of the audience. The star actors wore clothes which were often original in design and magnificent in texture. All the performers wore linen masks, painted with wide mouths and exaggerated features, and the actors used buskins (wooden soles about six inches high), and padding on their chests.

It is obvious that the verse must have been declaimed loudly, and that a fine voice was the actor's first asset: also that from the character of the performance, in an open-air theatre before an audience of something like twenty thou-

sand people, the action was inevitably slow, statuesque and dignified, without violent, rapid or subtle movement. There are occasional sudden emotional gestures: Evadne flings herself from a rock onto a funeral pyre beneath; Hecuba falls senseless when she hears the doom of Cassandra; but such things are the exception. All violent action took place 'off stage.' Nor was it possible for the art of this drama to be in any way 'representational' or realistic. Women's parts were, of course, played by men; the wearing of the masks precluded any change of facial expression in the acting, and the perpetual presence of the chorus forbade any scenes to be personal and private.

§

What range of stage effects, therefore, could be got under these conditions?

First of all there were all the uses of the highly trained dancers and singers in the chorus. The number of these was twelve—later increased to fifteen—in tragedy, and twenty-four in comedy. Greek dancing included every kind of pose and gesture. Aristotle defines it as an imitation of actions, characters and passions by means of postures and rhythmical movements. Probably particular rhythms, gestures and groupings were symbolic of definite ideas and emotions. To the rhythmical effects communicated by the dancing were added the singing and reciting of the verse. The Athenians were keen musicians. Cicero speaks of their 'refined and scrupulous ear,' and the interpretation of the choral lyrics was no doubt one of the most important elements of the whole production. The poets trained their own choruses. Aeschylus especially, in whose plays the choruses are all-

important, is said to have invented many new dance movements and rhythmical figures for them.

Then there were the further dramatic and pictorial opportunities of the general grouping on the stage: the interrelation between the chorus and the characters in the play, and between the circular dancing floor and the raised platform stage behind. We can imagine, for example, how exciting, how moving, and how pictorially impressive, would be that scene in the *Agamemnon* of the King's return. The chorus has just created an emotional background of the bloodguilt and human greed and brooding horror over the whole of the house of Atreus. They have sung of the relentlessness of sin and vengeance, their cruelty and ruthlessness and endlessness, and of how Justice

heeding not the power
Of wealth by man misgloried, guideth all
To her own destined hour.

Then, ironically, as these words still echo in the air, Agamemnon enters in his chariot, the triumphant conqueror, with his train of captives and soldiers, and Cassandra. The chorus greet him coolly, in spite of his magnificent array, not pretending that they approved of his expedition to Troy, but hoping that now peace may follow war, and good come out of evil. They conclude, however, with the ominous suggestion that there has been treachery at home during his absence.

From the deep of my thought and in love I say
'Sweet is a grief well ended';
And in time's flow thou wilt learn and know
The true from the false,
Of them that were left to guard the walls
Of thine empty House unfriended.

Ironically again, Clytemnestra appears on the palace steps as these words are being sung, and Agamemnon breaks into a speech, half boasting and half threats, and wholly harsh and hard. Clytemnestra replies with a vivid picture of the misery of the lonely wife while her husband is at the wars, and ends by ordering her attendants to spread the crimson carpet on the floor that the King may walk on it into his palace. All this while Cassandra in her chariot stands silent, a figure of mystery, but when Agamemnon, after a show of unwillingness, has consented to play the returning hero, he charges Clytemnestra to look after Cassandra well, and Clytemnestra replies with a magnificent hypocrisy of welcome to them both, which almost turns Lady Macbeth welcoming Duncan into an amateur who has forgotten her lines. Agamemnon and Clytemnestra then go into the palace, and the dramatic dialogue between Cassandra and the chorus follows.

That great scene of the return of Agamemnon illustrates very well the sort of effects which could be produced supremely well in the Greek theatre. Imagine it played in bright sunlight with the distant hills and the sky giving a limitless background to its eternal verities—to the universal moral problems of sin and punishment, of war and conquest, of power and cruelty, of provocation and revenge; and to the universal human emotions of triumph and hatred, of fear and jealousy, and bitter silent suffering. Meanwhile, the eyes and ears of the audience would be filled with the enchantment of rhythmical sound and movement, stirred by the reverberating resonance of the great speeches, satisfied with the grouping of those great single figures against the chorus of old men, the crowds of the triumphal procession, and the women attendants on the Queen; and held by that vivid splash of crimson, leading the minds of

them all to the blood in which the House is already steeped, and which is so soon to be shed again within its walls.

Quite apart from the ritual and religious basis of Greek tragedy, the practical conditions under which it was played made it inevitable that its stage effects should depend on elements of formal pattern, not on any swiftness or intimacy of emotional variety. All its intricacy of design, both pictorially and, in a sense, emotionally, must have depended on the chorus. No one really now knows what the realities of Greek singing and dancing were, and there is no doubt that the words, the music and the dance were an inseparable unit in their effect; but we can nevertheless guess something, even from the words alone, of the enormous part the chorus must have played as an instrument in the Greek orchestra of dramatic values.

Its part changed very considerably, of course, during the period covered by the three great tragedians. In the oldest Greek play which has survived, *The Suppliants*, the chorus is three-fifths of the whole. It is always at least half the play in Aeschylus, and a half which plays a very important part in the *action*, as well as supplying the musical and dancing elements. It is the destiny of the SUPPLIANT women themselves, who are the chorus, which is the story of the play; and in the *Eumenides*, the chief interest is in the Furies. But in Euripides it takes less and less part in the plot itself. It just looks on calmly while Medea sends the children with the poisoned gifts to Creon, and watches and waits while she goes into the palace to murder the children. It is true that in the *Hippolytus* the chorus swear not to betray Phaedra's secret and have to abide by their oath, which forbids them to do the obvious thing and tell Theseus of his injustice to his son, and so does away with the sense of absurdity of their being there silent. But it is clear that Euripides, with

his instincts towards humanizing drama, found the chorus a nuisance. Occasionally, indeed, he creates new effects for them by turning them into a group of real people. In the *Ion* they become a party of Athenian maidens visiting Delphi for the first time and comment like any modern tourists on the things which remind them of home, and in the *Iphigenia in Tauris* the escape of Orestes and Iphigenia depends on the silence of the chorus of captive Greek maidens. They promise it, but when they are left, still prisoners, they burst into a heartbreaking chant of longing for their lost home. But much more often, the chorus becomes simply the body which Horace summed up irreverently in the *Ars Poetica*.

Still let them give sage counsel, back the good,
Attemper wrath, and cool impetuous blood,
Praise the spare meal that pleases but not sates,
Justice and law, and peace with unbarred gates,
Conceal all secrets, and the Gods implore
To crush the proud and elevate the poor.

But in spite of this, the playwrights understood its power very well.

The dramatists early realised how many important uses the standing stage-army could be made to serve. It can expound the past, comment on the present, forebode the future. It provides the poet with a mouthpiece and the spectator with a counterpart of himself. It forms a living foreground of common humanity above which the heroes tower; a living background of pure poetry which turns lamentation into music and horror into peace. It provides both a wall, as Schiller held, severing the drama like a magic circle from the real world, and a bridge between the heroic figures of legend and the average humanity of the audience.¹

¹ *Tragedy*. F. L. Lucas.

It was in itself an instrument of the three great theatrical necessities of suspense, movement and variety. It holds up the action at the moments of greatest dramatic intensity, prolonging the tension while at the same time it varies the pitch and tone of the emotion. When Phaedra, for instance, rushes into the palace vowing she will somehow involve Hippolytus in her own ruin, the chorus sing an exquisite song of release and escape into the life of nature; or Antigone moves with all the vitality and courage of proud youth against the chorus of nodding feeble old men of Thebes. Or again, the chorus will create the 'atmosphere' of a dramatic theme by emphasizing a symbol, as they do by their constant reference to the 'net' which is going to enmesh Agamemnon both symbolically and actually—or they will generalize the theme of the particular episode of the action, showing how Clytemnestra's action springs from a long history of revenge and murder and bloodlust and creating the sensation of a pervading miasma of sin. The presence of the chorus indeed always widened the action by suggesting two planes of experience from which the dramatic material could be viewed—the particular and the universal, and the shift from one to the other of these gave perpetual opportunities for variation and challenge. There were, too, all the modifications which could be created by the alternations between the narrative and dialogue passages and the pure lyric forms, and the changes from one emotional coloring and tone to another within the lyrics themselves, as they led up to and away from the great direct dramatic climaxes and catastrophes.

It was the presence of the chorus which required the practice of the unities of time and place (though they are very occasionally broken), but the choral lyrics themselves extended the *idea* of time and space to any limits. The action itself partook of the general formality of the whole ritual.

The prologue brought the story to the moment which, in a later convention, would be the opening of the last act. There was no room, therefore, for any *development* of character within the scope of the action—nor indeed for any strict verisimilitude. For apart from the ubiquitous chorus, plausible exits and entrances are few, and characters often have to remain silent for long periods when there is no adequate reason for their presence on the stage.

§

The Greek dramatist worked within a very strict convention. Spiritually, his play had to deal with large moral questions, and formally, it must follow certain recognized lines of development. It must have a prologue, a messenger's speech, passages of dialogue in single lines, and above all a chorus. Nor could the playwright use original invention in his actual plot. The facts of the story were always known beforehand, and could not be tampered with. They were true in the way the stories of the Bible are true to a Fundamentalist. The interest was not the interest of curiosity about the outcome of the action, but the interest of a fresh treatment of a familiar theme.

It is surprising, therefore, to find how much personality and character is expressed by the individual dramatist working within these somewhat rigid limitations. In spite of its rules, the drama of fifth-century Greece was, of course, in no sense a static art; it was a living, changing and growing one, and its effects therefore were, within its essential limitations, molded and developed in different ways by every great artist who worked in the Greek theatre. In the earlier tragedies the basic form was a series of choral lyrics interspersed with dramatic tableaux creating the story; but in

the later plays of Euripides, the basic form has become a series of dramatic scenes interspersed with choral lyrics. The movement throughout is always towards greater realism; it grows away from its root of religious ritual towards the free-flowering creation of essentially human problems and figures. Even in the early dramas, the element of realism is always cropping up. Clytemnestra, describing the lonely rumor-haunted atmosphere of the house, when the men are away at the war, describes exactly what such hysterical nervous strain is in all ages and in all surroundings.

None could tell,
Save me, the weight of years intolerable
I lived while this man lay at Ilion.
That any woman thus should sit alone
In a half-empty house, with no man near,
Makes her half-blind with dread! And in her ear
Always some voice of wrath; now messengers
Of evil; now not so; then others worse,
Crying calamity against mine and me.

Oh, had he half the wounds that variously
Came rumoured home, his flesh must be a net,
All holes from heel to crown! And if he met
As many deaths as I met tales thereon,
Is he some monstrous thing, some Geryon
Three-souled, that will not die, till o'er his head
Three robes of earth be piled, to hold him dead?

Aye, many a time my heart broke, and the noose
Of death had got me; but they cut me loose.
It was those voices always in my ear.

Or Orestes' old nurse, hearing of his death, wandering off
into the eternal memories of those who tend small babies.

Ah, I am a poor
Old woman! Such a tangle as they were,
The troubles in this House, and hard to bear,
Long years back, and all aching in my breast!

But none that hurt like this! Through all the rest . . .
Well, I was sore, but lived them down and smiled.
But little Orestes, my heart's care, the child
I took straight from his mother; and save me
He had no other nurse. And, Oh, but he
Could scream and order me to tramp the dark!
Aye, times enough, and trouble enough, and stark
Wasted at that! A small thing at the breast,
That has no sense, you tend it like a beast,
By guesswork. For he never speaks, not he,
A babe in swaddling clothes, if thirst may be
Or hunger come, or any natural need.
The little belly takes its way. Indeed
'Twas oft a prophet he wanted, not a nurse;
And often enough my prophecies, of course,
Came late; and then the heaps to wash and dry!

While in Euripides, the reader feels as much in the modern world as in the ancient. His characters are the men and women we know, seen exactly as they are. Pylades, refusing to live if Orestes dies, partly out of pure friendship, but partly because of what 'they' will say: 'Men will whisper how I left my friend to die. Nay, I love you, and I dread men's scorn'; Electra, frenzied with grief about the plight of Orestes, yet able to notice that Helen, pretending to sacrifice her 'shorn locks' at her sister Clytemnestra's tomb, has only trimmed off the tips of her hair, sparing all its beauty; Medea, gloating over the deaths of her enemies with the sadistic delight of a Regan.

Take thine ease, good friend, and tell,
How died they? Hath it been a very foul
Death?

And then the subtleties of his irony. How, as Gilbert Murray has pointed out, his intellectual obliquity of approach is such, that a story which is ostensibly a celebration

of a God may in its effect expose his immorality, and that a piece of rhetoric which is ostensibly a tirade against woman may in effect merely expose the egotism of the man who utters it. Not a comfortable dramatist at all, in fact, for an audience in any place or time! It is no wonder his critics complained that he had robbed tragedy of its religion, its moral beauty and its ethical grandeur, and that instead of uplifting the mind and spirits of men, it merely set them arguing.

And indeed realism, when it was no longer in the hands of a great artist like Euripides, brought about the downfall of the Greek drama, just as, when it is no longer in the hands of a great artist like Ibsen, it has brought about the downfall of the modern drama. In the fourth century B.C. we find all the symptoms of decadence. Tragedy became softened to romance; the choral lyric and dance dwindled and finally disappeared. Poets ceased to be men of the theatre and to produce their own plays, and Demosthenes tells us of the prominence of a new class of men hired and paid by the *choregi* who made theatrical instruction their sole business. It was also the age of great actors, and Aristotle tells us in the *Poetics* that in his time poets had already begun to write plays with a view to exhibiting the capacities of some individual star performer; and that scenes which had no connection with the plot would be introduced for the sole purpose of enabling an actor to display his talents.

Yet it is the qualities which are represented in that scene from the *Agamemnon* which are the immortal qualities of Greek tragic art. Whichever of the dramatists we are reading, and whatever personal coloring they have given their work, it is still their treatment of great moral and emotional problems, their creation of more than life size, yet psychologically valid figures, and their use of poetry and symbolism

to suggest atmosphere, and to emphasize both the particular and the general aspects of their theme in innumerable subtle ways, which are the glories of the golden day of drama.

§

And it was these qualities which were, apparently, appreciated by the Greek audience.

The Greeks did not, of course, go to their theatre as we go to ours. It was not an entertainment to pass away a few hours—a way of killing time. The Greeks preferred time alive, not dead. Their drama was a part of the national and religious life in which they all partook. Their poets exercised a profound influence on the public mind and character, and were in their turn influenced strongly by national currents of feeling and thinking. For they were all men of the world as well as artists. A poet was a citizen like everyone else. He fought, if necessary, in his country's service, until the age of sixty; he did public work in the political assembly and on juries; he probably worked his own farm or business. The great dramatists lived like this and yet managed each to write about a hundred plays. As Pericles said: 'the individual Athenian in his own person seems to have the power of adapting himself to the most varied forms of action with the utmost versatility and grace.' Aeschylus was a soldier, and probably a holder of public office in the state, as well as being a poet and an entire theatre staff—scene painter, designer of costumes, trainer of chorus and producer of plays. Sophocles was a general in the army and a diplomat, a performer in his own choruses and an immensely popular public figure, amiable, witty, gentle and generous. Euripides was an impassioned patriot, and watched the gradual decay of his beloved country with grief and anger, striving to re-

mind her over and over again of the great ways from which she was drifting, and urging her vigorously to face the facts of her growing bigotry and superstition.

In the plays of the three great dramatists, indeed, we can see all the phases of the great age of Greek democracy; its creation, its achievement, and its death struggle. The flow and development of the art of the drama itself is exactly parallel to its political background. Aeschylus is the great creator and innovator, the poet of urgent moral passion and nobility of thought, but whose artistic achievement is sometimes rough-hewn and craggy. Sophocles is the great artist, the flower of complete achievement, of ease of handling and perfect harmony of matter and technique. Euripides developed into the great critic and satirist, bitterly condemning his age, as Socrates did, for its backsliding from its own great ideals, exhibiting to it its essentially empty, conventional views about religion, war and women.

But they all represented different aspects of what we call 'the Greek spirit': that spirit which for a short time, in a small place, produced an age in which it seems to us now that civilization reached a point nearer perfection than it has ever achieved since. A point where, out of a world sunk in rigid traditional superstition, full of dirty and cruel customs, senseless taboos, and indecent and ridiculous stories of gods and heroes, suddenly arose men who longed to develop all the powers latent in them, who lived consciously and gladly in a spirit of free public service, and of private enjoyment of all the best things of life, and where the love of truth, beauty and goodness inspired a whole community, instead of a few stray individuals in a universe of brutes. 'We love beauty, yet we are simple; we love wisdom (the Greek *sophia* implies all knowledge, art and culture) and yet manly vigor as well: by our own intelligence we see and judge the right. Reason

is not, we think, a hindrance to action; the true hindrance to action is to omit the discipline of thought.' A people free, but not lawless; pious, but not superstitious; a people loving knowledge and freedom; strong and supple in body, mind and spirit.

There are two early plays of Euripides which express clearly the human ideals on which the Athenians set the greatest store. In *The Children of Heracles*, the children flee from their persecutors to Athens. The herald of the King of Argos, their enemy, finds them there, and urges that they shall be given up to him. The spokesman of Athens declares that Athens is a free city and will take no orders from any other power. As to the fate of the children not being his business, 'it is always the business of Athens to save the oppressed.' Again in *The Suppliant Women*, Theseus, King of Athens, breaks through the convention that to touch polluted flesh brings pollution. He goes himself and carries the dead bodies of the Argive men to the funeral pyre, and tends the wounded, saying, 'Why should men be repelled by one another's suffering?' And when a rude Theban herald asks, 'Who is the monarch (tyrannos) of this land?' Theseus replies, 'There is no "tyrannos" here. This is a free city: and when I say a free city, I mean one in which the whole people by turns takes part in the sovereignty, and the rich have no privileges as against the poor.'

As examples of the freedom from prejudice, and the liberty of speech which could be practiced, there are no more telling illustrations than the performances of the two great anti-war plays, Euripides' *Trojan Women* and Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. In 416 B. C. Athens unjustly provoked the islanders of Melos into war. After a long siege they conquered the quiet and historic little town, massacred the men who defended it, and sold the women and children into slavery. In

the following spring, Euripides produced *The Trojan Women*, with its terrible indictment of a similar savagery, and it was given a prize. The *Lysistrata*, with its bitter criticism and frank ridicule of warfare, was performed, and given the first prize, during the second year of the Peloponnesian war, when Athens was being defeated, and her downfall was in sight. We have only to imagine an anti-war play being performed, and being acclaimed as a masterpiece, in London, Paris or Berlin in 1915 to realize what such tolerance and detachment of mind must have meant.

§

From many points of view the Greek drama, the Greek stage and the Greek audience bear no relation whatever to anything we now associate with the theatre. Much of the subject matter of the plays is meaningless and tedious to twentieth-century minds. It is impossible, for instance, to be passionately interested about the sacred rights of the dead to solemn burial, and in many of the plays there is a disconcerting mixture of primitive savagery with high intellectual passion which gives us the sensation of standing with one foot in darkest Africa and the other on the Acropolis. The ritual background of pagan superstition is a perpetual stumbling block to appreciation, and the mythological stories which condition so much of the dramatic behavior can appeal to us only as folklore. Our interest is detached and disinterested. The stories are not *our* stories, they are not the great traditions and myths on which *our* moral attitudes and emotional beliefs are founded. They bear no part in our national and civic existence; they have no roots in our conscious or unconscious beings; and the glosses of the poets on them inevitably lose much of their force.

Artistically the loss is not so great, though it is formidable enough. The plays were written to be interpreted in a theatrical medium which is entirely foreign to any we know, in conditions which, if we produced them in their entirety, would seem merely bizarre, and which appear artificial and empty enough in the very modified form in which modern revivals are played. The dramatic conventions are stiff and unfamiliar. The progress of the action is very simple and very slow, and is interrupted by long debates whose matter and manner are alike tedious and unreal. Its own great means of providing variety—the chorus—we can only appreciate imperfectly, since no one now knows what the realities of Greek singing and dancing were.

And to cap all, the plays are not only in a foreign language, but a dead one at that, so that we have to depend upon the guesses of scholars and the caprices of translators to interpret them at all.

There is perhaps no greater proof of the immutability of the bases of dramatic design and of the dramatic creative impulse in man, than the fact that anyone who cares about drama continues to find vital stimulus in the Greeks, and to hear them in a language now dead and a tradition now obsolete, still speaking triumphantly in voices which Death and Chance and Time have proved quite unable to render either hoarse or alien.

THE ELIZABETHANS

IT APPEARS ON THE FACE OF IT that it should be very much easier for the modern imagination to grasp the reality of the Elizabethan theatre than that of the Greeks, for every school child is introduced to the plays of Shakespeare at quite an early age, and is usually nowadays instructed in the mechanics of the Elizabethan stage at the same time. But the approach to the Elizabethans through Shakespeare leads to a false view of the subject. Shakespeare, though he was very much of an age, was also for all time. His plays can be, and generally are, discussed by the same dramatic standards as the plays of today, and presented in the theatre in the same manner as the plays of today. They can survive being so discussed and presented without any dimming of their achievement, though I fancy it is only the carefully inculcated reverence for their greatness which hides their strangeness from modern eyes. But judge the average Elizabethan play by the standards of, say, Galsworthy or Ibsen, and it suffers total eclipse, and appears merely 'undramatic,' crude, bombastic and silly. For many of the characteristic dramatic conventions of the Elizabethans, and their specialized aims and interests in dramatic art, are not only different from those of today, but are diametrically opposed to them. Imagine *Hamlet* presented to an au-

dience of today, who had no previous knowledge whatever of the play. What would they make of it? Any comment would inevitably be a fusillade of questions. Why does Hamlet pretend to be mad? What did all that business mean about the Ghost saying 'Swear' under the stage? Why do they have all that stupid rhetoric in the Player's speech? And why all those long soliloquies? Is Hamlet meant to be a sympathetic character, and if so, why does he behave in that cruel way to Ophelia? Why didn't he kill the King immediately after the Play scene, when his guilt was proved? Why is there a Dumb Show and then the same story all over again in the play? Why drag in Fortinbras, and why have such a holocaust of corpses at the end?

Hamlet was first presented, however, to an audience to whom the outline of such a play was probably a commonplace. It was a Revenge tragedy, which in itself implied a whole group of conventions in the plot which they took for granted. The hero would come in wearing black for the loss of a near relative; his speeches would be full of moral tags; he would meditate on suicide; he would simulate madness; he would be in love with a lady who would herself go mad; and he would procrastinate, and let slip several opportunities of murdering his victim, since, unless he did, there would be no play! They were an audience, moreover, to whom the subjects of monarchy and succession and usurpation were burning topical questions; to whom marrying a brother's widow was incest; to whom ghost-lore was a living subject of speculation; to whom the fencing bout was a real sporting event; and finally, to whom clowning, madness, bawdy jokes, sheer noise, and plenty

Of carnal, bloody and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,

were as much a commonplace of their entertainment in the theatre as sentimental sex appeal is to the cinema audience of today.

§

Like the cinema audience of today, too, the Elizabethan audience was drawn from all ranks in the social scale.

The place is so free in entertainment, allowing a stool as well to your Farmer's son as to your Templer; that your Stinkard has the self-same liberty to be there in his tobacco fumes, which your sweet Courtier hath; and that your Carman and Tinker claim as strong a voice in their suffrage, and sit to give judgment on the play's life and death, as well as the proudest Momus among the tribe of Critics.¹

Another description, that of the audience at the Blackfriars, which catered more for the 'upper classes,' gives a picture of a soldier, Captain Martio, full of tall stories; of a traveler, Sir Iland Hunt, just back from Jerusalem, with a fragment of Jacob's ladder; a 'Cheapside dame'; a class of person sufficiently described as a 'plumed dandebat'—a fashion-monger, with clothes from all over Europe and a 'spruce coxcomb,' who carries a mirror in the lid of his tobacco box, and is always looking to see if his ruff is straight and 'which way his feather wags.' At the popular theatres, the grocer and his wife and their apprentice, as portrayed in *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, probably typify the bulk of the hard-working citizens and solid plebeian element in the audience. And, since audiences have much in common in all ages, we are not surprised when Ben-Jonson² complains that every member of the audience finds something to criticize.

¹ *The Gull's Hornbook*. Dekker.

² *The Case Is Altered*.

The sport is at a new play, to observe the sway and variety of opinion that passeth it. . . . One says he likes not the writing, another likes not the plot, another not the playing: and sometimes a fellow that comes not there past once in five years . . . will be as deep mired in censuring as the best.

He complains particularly of one objectionable type of 'capricious gallant,' whose behavior is 'more infectious than the pestilence.'

They have taken such a habit of dislike in all things that they will approve nothing . . . but sit dispersed, making faces and spitting, wagging their upright ears, and cry *Filthy! filthy!*

There was probably plenty for any fastidious person to cry *Filthy!* at, for it is most unlikely that the tastes of the lower levels of the audience were anything but low. What Shakespeare calls the 'barren spectators,' and Webster the 'uncapable multitude,' and other Elizabethan writers 'the blunt monster with uncounted heads,' 'the rabble,' 'the squirrels' (because of their nut-cracking habits), or 'the clamorous fry,' must have had a considerable place among the audience of the public theatres: a crude, callous, brutal section of the populace who probably cared for little except the broadest and most knock-about comedy, and for such things as the scene of the blinding of Gloucester in *Lear*, or the atrocities of *Titus Andronicus*, or the fate of the villain in *Antonio's Revenge*,¹ who has his tongue plucked out, and the limbs of his murdered child served up to him in a dish, and is finally hacked in pieces; on which the Ghost remarks:

'Tis done, and now my soul shall sleep in rest.

Sons that revenge their father's blood are blest.

But educated or uneducated, it was an audience that was 'theatre-minded.' For generations, dramatic entertainment of

¹ Marston.

one sort or another had been a real part of the life of the people of England. The miracle plays and the folk plays had bred actors and audiences up and down the land, while every nobleman had a troupe of entertainers in his house for the amusement of his household and his guests. It was from these troupes, indeed, that the professional companies of actors sprang. During the absences of their patrons, they were allowed to travel about giving performances, and with the growth of London under the Tudors, and the spread of secular entertainment, the companies saw their chance for an independent existence and a steady demand for their wares. From performances in inn-yards, it was a short step to the building of a theatre, its shape evolved from the adaptation of the galleries of the inn-yard and the circular base of the bull-baiting ring. By the early years of the seventeenth century there were about ten such houses in London, then a city of only about two hundred thousand inhabitants. They were mostly built and owned by enterprising financiers, and leased to companies of actors as tenants. The actors were skilled entertainers, and an apprenticeship for the stage meant training in music and dancing, fencing and wrestling, as well as in elocution and gesture. They must have earned good money, for several of the company to which Shakespeare belonged (which included Richard Burbage, Hemming and Condell, and Will Kempe, the comedian) held shares in the syndicate which built the Globe Theatre in 1598. It was quite possible for actors to achieve assured social positions. Edward Alleyn founded a school and married one of the daughters of Dr. Donne, the Dean of St. Paul's; when Burbage died, his friend the Earl of Pembroke refused to go to an entertainment given in honor of the French Ambassador; Shakespeare himself had a coat of arms, and died one of the wealthiest and worthiest of the citizens of Stratford.

Theatrical entertainments were equally popular among the educated and cultivated classes. The acting of plays was a regular feature of Tudor education in schools and universities, the Inns of Court celebrated special occasions with dramatic performances, and they were regularly arranged in the royal palaces. These indoor performances in private halls would, of course, appeal to a higher general level of intelligence than those in the public theatres, but the majority of plays seem to have been produced in both. Shakespeare's company purchased a hall in 1608 and turned it into an indoor theatre, the Blackfriars; but though many of Shakespeare's plays must have been performed there, it is unlikely that any were specially written for it. The stage and audience for which he and his fellow-dramatists primarily wrote was the public stage and the mixed audience at the Globe.

§

The resources of this stage were, to our modern ideas, meager in the extreme. The main acting area was a wide platform running out into the auditorium and surrounded on three sides by the spectators. Behind this was a space used partly for the 'tiring house' where the actors dressed and kept their properties, and partly for a curtained-off recess—the inner stage—which served as a bedroom for Desdemona, a cell for Prospero or a tent for Brutus. Here, too, by the drawing back of curtains, Faustus would be 'discovered' in his study, or Ferdinand and Miranda playing chess. Above this was the upper stage, which was Juliet's balcony and Cleopatra's monument, or the walls of Harfleur, into whose breach the soldiers of Henry V hurled themselves. But places simply moved from the upper stage to the lower if so required for the action. Juliet's bedroom opens off the balcony

in one scene and comes down on to the inner stage in the next; Antony is hauled up into Cleopatra's monument to die on the upper stage, but Cleopatra clearly dies in it on the main stage. These two acting levels allowed of complicated dramatic effects in the hands of a skilled dramatist, as, for example, the scene in Middleton's *Women Beware Women*, where Livia plays a game of chess on the main stage with Bianca's mother, to the accompaniment of an ironic dialogue where every remark has a meaning in the game and a secondary suggestion in the action of the play; while on the upper stage we have glimpses and hear fragments of the conversation between Bianca and the Duke, who is supposedly showing her the picture gallery, and is, in reality, seducing her.

Finally, there were trap-doors in the flooring of the main stage, through which ghosts and devils could appear and disappear. The whole stage was roofed, but the rest of the theatre was open, and the performances took place at two o'clock in the afternoon.

Scenery was suggested entirely by properties. Anything easily movable was provided: tables, chairs, beds, altars, walls, small trees, banks, tombs, cauldrons, a trunk, a clothes-basket, an ass's head and so on. Stage furniture-removers in livery would bring on and remove such effects, in much the same way as they still do in Chinese and Japanese plays of today.

In the great days of the Elizabethan drama, the element of spectacle in the theatre was limited to richness of dress, and to effects of grouping and movement. These must often have been very striking, using as they did the two stage levels, and the number of dances, processions, weddings, funerals, trials, crowds, marches and banquets in Elizabethan plays illustrate the artistic use made of color and formal pattern in stage effects. For the rest, a flat declaration,

'Well, this is the forest of Arden,' or a revealing greeting, 'Good dawning to you,' can be enough to point time and place; while the many exquisite descriptive lines and subtle images in Shakespeare which distill from words a sense of background and atmosphere illustrate how, to a sensitive audience, a bare stage can become a flower-strewn wood or a moonlit glade, a blasted heath, a battlefield or a sunrise; each lit, too, not from a mechanical switchboard, but by the creation of an emotional mood in words. Shakespeare's plays are full of oblique tributes to the dramatic imagination of his audience. Imagine, for example, a playwright having the sheer audacity to choose the story of Antony and Cleopatra for a subject, when he knew that Cleopatra had to be played by a boy; but there is perhaps no greater compliment to the dramatic sense of the Elizabethan audience than Shakespeare's deliberate choice of *darkness* as the setting for all the most powerful scenes in his tragedies. The ghost scenes in *Hamlet*, the storm scenes in *Lear*, the conspiracy scene in *Julius Caesar*, the murder of Duncan, the murder of Banquo, the murder of Desdemona—they all take place at night. Yet Shakespeare wrote these scenes and deliberately planned for their production on an open stage in the light of a summer's afternoon, relying only on the carrying of torches, and talk of the chaste stars and of night's candles to create his background. Could a playwright's trust in his audience—and an audience made up of the dregs as well as the cream of the populace—go further?

This abolition from the bonds of time and place in the writing of plays, which the bare stage gave, permitted a flexibility and simplicity of technique which the drama has now completely lost. The 'cinema technique' of a multiplicity of short scenes is the accepted technique of the Elizabethans. Since the actors brought their own background with them, so

to speak, there was no need of anything else, and, besides the obvious artistic advantages of this method in providing opportunities for variation and contrast of emotion, color, tone and pitch, it allowed an epic breadth of treatment, and effects of rapidity of movement and the passage of time, which is all its own. Take the play of *Antony and Cleopatra*, for instance, which has forty-two changes of scene in it, covering a period of twelve years, and taking place in Cleopatra's palace in Alexandria, various houses and streets in Rome, on Pompey's galley or a plain in Syria, at Athens, Actium, in various camps, parts of the field of battle, and in Cleopatra's monument. The Elizabethan method of continuous performance, with a few references in the text to guide the audience as to locality, created the suggestion not only of pace and energy of action, but also that more subtle dramatic message that this love story of the 'strumpet's fool' and the strumpet, whom we have seen at the opening of the play embracing to the words, 'the nobleness of life is to do this,' does, as a matter of fact, send out currents of causation to every corner of the civilized world, bringing disaster not only into the private lives of others in distant lands, but affecting the fates of empires and monarchies, armies and fleets.

The artists and technicians of the cinema world have recently rediscovered the immense potentialities in this method of story-telling. The art of cutting and *montage* is the art of the Elizabethan playwright transposed into the terms of another age and medium.

§

This single point of the bareness of the stage is enough to illustrate the great basic difference between modern and Elizabethan dramatic conventions. With the advent of the

indoor theatre in the seventeenth century, and the popularity of the Masque, with its elaborate scenery and 'machines,' the element of scenic illusion crept in, and thenceforth the history of the theatre is the history of the gradual domination of the drama by its medium. Modern drama aims at *an illusion of life*; the Elizabethans had a much greater capacity for 'make-believe,' and considered the tricks by which this illusion is created as an unnecessary waste of time. That is why, to appreciate Elizabethan plays justly, it is essential to forget everything about the dramatic technique of the modern drama from Ibsen onwards, and about the classical drama from Racine backwards. Modern playwrights, for example, expend their utmost ingenuity on an 'exposition' which shall convey to the audience the information necessary to an understanding of the play, and at the same time seem 'natural' in the dialogue. But the Elizabethans did not need to be persuaded that they were watching 'life' in the theatre. They were quite content to have the situation explained to them by Prospero sitting down with Miranda and saying, in effect, 'I will now tell you the story of my life,' and, in reality, telling it all direct to the audience. They cheerfully accepted the essential difference between the material of life and the material of dramatic art, and they were willing to assent to a whole string of theatrical conventions as short cuts to the enjoyment of what they had come to the theatre to see and hear.

And what they had come to see and hear was not a unity in the sense that a Greek drama was a unity, or that an Ibsen play is a unity. For one thing, the Elizabethans did not want only one kind of experience in the theatre—the representation of the interplay of human character and action—to which we have now become habituated. They

liked variety, and a popular play was often a medley of almost as many kinds of theatrical entertainment as a modern revue. The theatre fulfilled many functions which were extra-theatrical. It provided the Elizabethan public with everything which is now provided by the newspaper, the radio, the circulating library, the cinema and the concert hall. Music, both vocal and instrumental, was an essential, for it was an age when music was so natural a part of everyday life that it was not only customary for a nobleman, such as the Duke Orsino, to have his private musicians to perform to him whenever he felt disposed, but it was the usual thing to have a cittern (a simple form of lute) in every barber's shop for customers to amuse themselves with while waiting to be shaved. Music was performed during the intervals, and during the course of the play. The dramatists used it too, to suggest and to heighten emotional atmosphere. Shakespeare's songs immediately come to mind, or that scene of eerie suggestion when the sentries before Cleopatra's palace hear mysterious music in the air during the night. We hear of 'hellish music' in a play of Dekker's full of devils and such like; and of a song 'sung by madmen to a dismal kind of music' in *The Duchess of Malfi*. All formal and ceremonial occasions would be accompanied by music, and all martial ones by trumpets, cornets and drums. On a stage, too, where pictorial effects were so limited, it was natural to use sound as a dramatic stimulus as much as possible. Thunder and fireworks, or 'explosions,' were commonplaces—indeed, the Globe was burned down in 1613 as the result of an 'explosion' setting the thatch on the roof on fire—but we can imagine that the knocking on the gate in *Macbeth*, the alarm bells in *Macbeth* and *Othello*, the irrevocable strikings of the clock in *Dr. Faustus*, and the

tolling of the bell, to which Bosola brings her coffin to the Duchess of Malfi, would be powerful theatrical effects.

Then besides music and noise, the Elizabethan audience wanted plenty of clowning of all kinds, plenty of fighting (partly for the excitement, partly because it was an exhibition of swordsmanship and wrestling) and plenty of pageantry—processions, dumb-shows and the like. It is evident from all this that they did not miss the Greek chorus as an instrument to create variety. They had their music, their fools, their sub-plots, their dumb-shows, their masques and their battles. Moreover, the intimate relation between stage and audience in their theatre gave them opportunities which would have been impossible in the vast open-air theatres of the Greeks. They could create any number of subtle gradations of emotional tension and suspense, of character revelation and contrast which required a quick intimacy between players and spectators—that lightening and at the same time intensifying of Lear's own realization of his folly by the biting comments of the Fool, or all the byplay that goes into Hamlet's moods and mock-madness.

Another rapid variation in the dramatic movement which was a simple matter for the Elizabethans was the creation of very minor characters to provide moments of comedy or pathos. Such characters, who would have no time to 'plant' themselves on a modern stage, could establish a sudden vivid identity on the open Elizabethan stage without any difficulty. There is Barnardine in *Measure for Measure*, who comes upon the stage for about three minutes, but is unforgettable; or the little son of Lady Macduff, or little Giovanni in *The White Devil*. He meets his uncle, Francisco de Medici, dressed in black.

Fran. de Med. How now, my noble cousin! what, in black?

Giov. Yes, uncle, I was taught to imitate you

In virtue, and you must imitate me

In colour of your garments. My sweet mother

Is—

Fran. de Med. How! Where!

Giov. Is there; no yonder: indeed, sir, I'll not tell you

For I shall make you weep.

Fran. de Med. Is dead?

Giov. Do not blame me now,

I did not tell you so . . .

What do the dead do, uncle? do they eat,

Hear music, go a-hunting, and be merry,

As we that live?

Fran. de Med. No, coz; they sleep.

Giov. Lord, Lord, that I were dead!

I have not slept these six nights. When do they wake?

Fran. de Med. When God shall please.

Giov. Good God, let her sleep ever!

For I have known her wake an hundred nights,

When all the pillow where she laid her head

Was brine-wet with her tears. I am to complain to you,
sir;

I'll tell you how they have used her now she's dead:

They've wrapped her in a cruel fold of lead

And would not let me kiss her . . .

Fran. de Med. O, all of my poor sister that remains!—

Take him away for God's sake!

The chief characters, too, will vary their relationship to the audience throughout a single play. Instead of ignoring the audience altogether, and belonging to the world of the play only, as modern dramatic persons ostensibly do, they will sometimes address the audience as well as their fellow players, making a set speech on suicide, or the seven ages of man and so on, which is not strictly relevant to the drama at all; or becoming a kind of choric commentary, as when

Enobarbus describes Cleopatra, or King Lear reads life by flashes of lightning on the heath.

§

In the matter of the play proper, Elizabethan demands were very unlike those of today. We demand *plausibility* in the theatre; the Elizabethans did not. They happily accepted as axiomatic, for instance, that disguise is impenetrable—Rosalind in her boy's clothes cannot be recognized by either her father or Orlando; that slander is easily credible—they did not question the easy gulling of Othello or Claudio; and that action can arise without being adequately motivated in character. They did not expect a play to be the careful working out of a theme, and social ethics had not yet been discovered as useful material for drama. What they wanted was *the maximum emotional response from moment to moment on the stage*. The great dramatic artists of the age provide this, with profound and subtle dramatic effects which will be discussed elsewhere, but in the plays of the providers of 'good theatre'—the plays of Dekker, for instance, or of Beaumont and Fletcher—there are numberless examples of what the public were quite ready to accept. We have to remember that all Elizabethan theatres were repertory theatres. Plays were sold outright to managers, who would sometimes buy as many as twenty new plays in a year. None of these could hope to have more than a dozen performances during a season. A success might be carried over into the next season, but its life was a very brief one unless it became a tried popular favorite. The surprising thing is that Elizabethan plays have the finish and permanence which many do have. It is certainly not to be wondered at that many should be craft rather than

art. The popular dramatist provided his public then, as now, with a series of theatrically effective situations, exploiting the eternally telling surprises, suspenses, conflicts and contrasts on which all popular drama has always been founded.

It did not matter if the sequences between these situations were unlikely or illogical, because the audience were quite used to ignoring such things. When Mr. A. P. Herbert's Topsy saw *Othello* in the belief that it was a modern play, she found herself much confused.

Well this *inane* black man gets *inanely* jealous about his *anaemic* wife the *moment* they're married, and my dear, she's a *complete* cow of a woman, too clinging, only there's an abstruse villain called Yahgo or something who *never* stops lying, and my dear for *no* reason at all I could discover. . . . Well, he keeps telling the old black man that the white girl has a fancy-friend, well my dear they've only been *married* about ten days, but the black man laps it up, one moment he's Nature honeymooner and the next he's knocking her down. . . . Well this Yahgo was the *sole* person in the play who had the *embryo* of a brain and *whatever* he said they all swallowed it. . . . You'd think anyhow his *wife* would have known something about it, but *Oh* no my dear she went on like the others as if Yahgo was George Washington. Simply all the black man had to do was to say to the subaltern look here they say you've been taking my wife out, is there anything in it, and he would have said Not likely General, I've a girl of my own, which he had though my dear the young man was *Nature's* Fish and only a half-wit would have suspected him of an anti-conjugal *thought*.¹

But clearly the Elizabethans had no objection to things of that sort. Many of their greatest plays are a chaos of inconsistencies. As Dover Wilson says in his recent edition of *Hamlet*: 'A Shakespeare play, composed of a succession of waves, through which the spectator moves like a swimmer,

¹ *The Trials of Topsy.*

is liable to serious misapprehension when viewed from an aerial perspective.' The modern habit of publishing plays, and the standards of novel-writing technique, have made us demand a logical and causal sequence of events, but it is useless to expect it as an essential of the Elizabethans. Everything in a fine Elizabethan play is alive, as it is being presented on the stage, and contributes to a final effect, but I think it is only in Ben Jonson, not a popular playwright, that the final effect aimed at includes strict structural logic. Each major artist creates his own particular dramatic pattern, a pattern of emotional, moral or intellectual interpretation, and the sequence of events he chooses is a framework for this, but he knows that by the time the audience are listening to the last act of a crowded drama, they will inevitably have forgotten much that has happened in the first; and that in grasping whatever dramatic and artistic experience he is directing their attention towards, superficial inconsistencies in plotting will have become insignificant. It is an illustration, for instance, of how audiences take things for granted if they are interested in the immediate scene before them, that, although *Hamlet* was always the most popular of Shakespeare's plays, it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that any critic suggested that his character was a problem.

§

It is clear from the neutrality of background on the Elizabethan stage, and from its disregard of logical consistency of plot, that the person of the actor himself became of paramount importance in stage technique. The illusion, such as it was, was vested in him alone. The poets apparently produced their own plays, as the Greeks did.

The actors are daily instructed, as it were in a school, so that even the most eminent actors have to allow themselves to be instructed by the dramatists, which arrangement gives life and ornament to a well-written play, so that it is no wonder that the English players surpass and have the advantage of others.¹

English actors had a very high reputation in Europe at the time; they seem to have been regarded with the admiration we give to the Russians nowadays, and their training, like that of the Russians of today, included music and dancing as well as the technique of acting. A certain Balthasar Paumgartner writes to his wife from Frankfort in 1592.

Here are some English actors whose plays I have seen. They have splendid good music, and are perfect in their dancing and jumping, whose equal I have never yet seen.

And it is the same in the Netherlands.

When some players of England came into these parts, the people not understanding what they said, only for their action followed them with wonderful concourse, yea, many young virgins fell in love with some of the players, and followed them from city to city, till the magistrates were forced to forbid them to play any more.²

It is rather strange that such references as Shakespeare makes are all derogatory to the actor. Buckingham in *Richard III* declares,

Tut, I can counterfeit the deep tragedian,
Speak and look back, and pry on every side,
Tremble and start at wagging of a straw,
Intending deep suspicion.

Macbeth sees life as a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more; and Hamlet, in the famous speech to the Players, criticizes directly

¹ Johannes Rhenanus, 1613.

² Fynes Moryson, 1592.

in a voice so urgent and impatient that we have no doubt at all that it is Shakespeare's own.

. . . O there be players that I have seen play, and heard others praise, and that highly . . . have so strutted and bellowed, that I have thought some of Nature's journeymen had made men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably.

First Player. I hope we have reformed that indifferently with us, sir.

Hamlet. O reform it altogether.

Yet there must have been something to be said on the other side too. Comedy, no doubt, always retained its own realistic tradition, but on a bare stage in an open-air theatre it would have been almost a necessity to exaggerate and formalize speech, gesture and pose. Early blank verse, that of Marlowe for instance, or of Shakespeare's own *Richard III*, lent itself to declamation. It was not until later, when speech rhythms were introduced into serious dramatic verse, that a more realistic style of acting could develop. The element of the boy actor, again, must have discouraged realism in serious plays, and have demanded an impersonal and formal representation of sexual situation. Granville Barker, in a very interesting passage on this subject, points out the tact with which Shakespeare always manages this kind of material.

But mark how Shakespeare both safeguards the device of the boy as woman and draws profit from it. He safeguards it by never setting the boy to do anything ridiculous or embarrassing. For all the theme's passion, there is next to no physical love-making in *Romeo and Juliet*. The two are left alone together only for the less than forty lines of their tragic parting, for her yet more tragic waking to find him dead, and for the balcony scene. This is the play's pre-eminent love-scene (it is, I suppose, the first passionate love scene in Elizabethan drama,

and may well have been the making of the play's success), and in it the lovers are carefully kept out of physical touch. Even when he comes to treat *Antony and Cleopatra*—of all subjects in the world!—Shakespeare can escape the obvious dangers; can miss what would seem to the dramatist of today his likeliest opportunities! Of Cleopatra's sensuous charms we hear chiefly from the misogynist Enobarbus (and if he who detests and distrusts her can glow into praise of them, they are potent, we may be sure). She herself—but for a hint or two—is not voluptuous even in speech; when they are together, it is with wit, malice or subtle mischief that she masters him. Never once throughout the play are they alone together. The dialogue provides for two embraces only; it may be three. The story begins with their parting; when they meet again catastrophe is imminent, and what is sensual in their passion is sublimated by its tragedy. Shakespeare, in fine, asked nothing of his Cleopatra that a boy cannot accomplish.

And another reason for formalism in acting on the Elizabethan stage is that the characterization did not in general demand subtlety of representation. The neglect of consistent plot structure makes it inevitable that there should be a similar neglect, in general, of any development and profundity in character creation. There again, the Elizabethan audience practiced that 'willing suspension of disbelief which constitutes poetic faith,' and accepted easily certain conventions which in no way interfered with their enjoyment. For the purpose of the theatre, they acquiesced in a view of human nature which Chapman voices in *Byron's Tragedy*.

O, of what contraries consists a man
Of what impossible mixtures! Vice and virtue
Corruption and eternesse at one time
And in one subject let together loose!

Given this simple belief that good and evil perpetually alternate and interchange in human nature, there was no

difficulty in believing that a man could be hero and villain alternately. It gave endless opportunities for tense dramatic situations to develop around him, without having to trouble very much about any adequate motivation for his conduct. Othello could easily be of unmatched nobility in Act I, fall an easy victim to jealousy in Act III, and murder his wife in Act V. It just happens.

Now I do see 'tis true. Look here, Iago;
All my fond love thus do I blow to heaven:
'Tis gone.
Arise, black vengeance, from thy hollow cell!
Yield up, O love, thy crown and hearted throne
To tyrannous hate!

In the same way Lady Macbeth just puts on evil, as it were a change of raiment.

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty. . . .

Sudden repentances change character completely in the opposite direction; whores become chaste, misers generous and brutal villains gentle. We, as modern readers, are outraged when Bertram in *All's Well*, after insulting Helena during the whole course of the action, turns round when he finds that, by a trick, she has fooled him, and accepts her as his wife. But Shakespeare was an Elizabethan playwright, and as such he just makes Bertram (in the world's worst couplet) begin a new life:

If she, my liege, can make me know this clearly
I'll love her dearly, ever, ever dearly!

And just as there was this convention that characters could turn from white to black, or black to white, so there

was another convention which provided for the instant recognition of certain stock characters whose functions were invariably rigid. A villain was a villain. Iago, for instance, at once says he is going to behave as one, and since he is also Italian, it is quite clear that he is a treacherous intriguer. There was no need for him to have a *motive* for being so. Similarly a revenger is a revenger, and immediately recognizable; a braggart soldier is a braggart soldier, and will be proved a coward; and there are many characters who are 'humors'—as much symbolic as human; while the distinction between age and youth is so rigid and conventional, that all parents are practically senile and all young people about the age of twenty.

Outside Shakespeare the characters in Elizabethan plays never interact and never develop: they are entirely flat. They live with a brilliant intensity and sharpness of outline in individual scenes, but their behavior from scene to scene is often arbitrary and incalculable. Nowhere is Shakespeare more different from his contemporaries than in this great dramatic quality. His men and women are indeed so realistic, so authentic, so recognizably like the human beings we know, that it has become the fashion to discuss them as if they were characters in real life, or at least, in realistic modern drama, and to resent the occasions when they illustrate the typically Elizabethan gap between motive and behavior. Instead, we should realize how unique Shakespeare's genius was in extending the limits of the Elizabethan convention, how his dramatic art not only transformed many of his seeming limitations into triumphs, but how it also transcended the theatrical artifice of the time, and demanded the sweeping away of outworn modes of acting. It was natural that Shakespeare should scorn the conventional acting and actors of the old regime: they

were not used to the demands he made upon them in his plays. 'To hold, as 'twere the mirror up to nature,' was not what the Elizabethan audience of 1600 expected of a tragic play and its interpreters. By stating the doctrine, and showing its possibilities in his plays, Shakespeare the playwright-producer of the Globe Theatre not only enormously enlarged the scope of dramatic art, and, by implication, the capacities of his audience for dramatic experience, but must surely have revolutionized—'reformed altogether'—the crudities of the Elizabethan acting tradition, substituting for the 'strutting and bellowing' of the old school, the new ideal of 'the modesty of nature.'

§

If anyone today were to announce that he was not particularly interested in the pictorial element in drama, or in the organization of the narrative, or in consistency of character, the natural answer would be to say, 'What else is there to be interested in?' But we have not so far mentioned what was the dominating interest in the Elizabethan theatre to the educated sections of the audience, if not to all.

'The essential structure of Elizabethan drama lies not in narrative or character, but in the words. The greatest poets are also the greatest dramatists.'¹ The great age of English drama, like the great ages of drama at all other times and places, was great because its drama was a literary drama: it explored and revealed life in an unparalleled richness and subtlety of language. How and why poetic drama is felt by all sensitive lovers of literature and of the theatre to be

¹ M. C. Bradbrook, *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy*, which contains a wealth of information about the subject of this chapter.

the most intense and comprehensive of all dramatic experiences, I shall try to explain later. Meanwhile it is part of the subject matter of this chapter to note some special reasons in the Elizabethan age for the popularity of poetry in the theatre.

It is a commonplace to point out that the sixteenth century in England was a time of unexampled linguistic growth and linguistic freedom and experiment. The new study of the classics brought in a flood of Latin words, and the secularizing of learning awakened men's minds and ears to the wealth of English dialects and the copiousness and vigor of their vocabularies. People were 'word-conscious' in a way unknown before or since. Both poets and prose writers delighted to invent language. Streams of new forms poured into Chaucer's 'well of English undefiled.' Purists attacked the novelties, of course, and gave lists of words, now commonplaces to us, which they regarded as dangerous and ridiculous innovations;¹ but there was no stemming the rush. The list of inventions made by Shakespeare himself is enormous, and not only of individual words, but of condensed metaphors which are now an essential part of our common speech. It is he who first speaks of 'cudgelling one's brains' and 'falling to blows,' of 'drinking healths' and 'reeling along the street,' of 'backing' a horse, and 'catching' a cold and being 'fond' of one another, and a hundred other everyday expressions.² The immense popu-

¹ In 1589, we find the following pilloried: *scientific, idiom, method, function, refuge, prolix, numerous, savage, penetrate, obscure, dimension*. And in 1592, *jovial, energetic, rascality, artificiality, notoriety, conscious, extensively*. Jonson in *The Poetaster* makes his bad poet vomit his most outrageous words, and these include, *retrograde, spurious, damp, clumsy, clutched, puffy, strenuous, and conscious*.

² See *Shakespeare's English*, by George Gordon, for a full and fascinating account.

larity of *Euphues* and the *Arcadia* and *The Faerie Queene* illustrate the fashion for all kinds of artificial and patterned speech. Then any number of letter-writers, conversation-manuals, collections of anecdotes, riddles, jests and puns, were published, so that anyone could be in the fashion. The jesters of the age, like Feste in *Twelfth Night*, were 'corrupters of words'; it was their job to play pranks with language: 'A sentence is but a chevril glove to a good wit: how quickly the wrong side may be turned outwards.' The antics of a Dogberry or a Verges struggling to improve his vocabulary with unfamiliar importations was another subject for comedy. The audiences expected the plays they saw to be full of intricate verbal witticisms and 'conceits.' Dekker in *The Gull's Hornbook* gives his gallant good advice on the subject,

Hoard up all the finest play-scrapes you can get: upon which your lean wit may most savourily feed, for want of other stuff, when the Arcadian and Euphuised gentlewomen have their tongues sharpened to set upon you.

Presumably the Elizabethans enjoyed, too, not only the agile verbal sparring of Benedict and Beatrice, or Rosalind and Orlando, but also the tedious and dreary quips of Edgar as Poor Tom, and the professional humor of Touchstone, Gobbo or Autolycus.

We have to remember that 'rhetoric' was one of the most important subjects in every school of the time, and that children learned the different rhetorical 'figures' as part of their normal education. The idea, therefore, of speech as an art, as an accomplishment to be displayed with all possible embellishment and complication, was a familiar concept to them. An exhibition of virtuosity in patterned language, of the elaborate use of alliteration, balance or repetition, of which we find so many examples in the dramatists, was

probably as easily appreciated by an Elizabethan audience as a volley of wisecracks by a modern one.

But this interest in language extended far beyond the recognition and enjoyment of artificial forms of verbal wit and rhetorical figures of speech. It meant that at least part of the audience would follow the whole play not merely as 'theatre' but as literature: that words would mean as much to them as events in the total effect. Instead of the play being written entirely on one speech level, as is the custom today, the greatest variety might be used—magnificent blank verse alternating with the argot of the underworld; the speech of kings and courts appearing side by side with that of clowns and countrymen; formal exercises in rhetoric interspersed with racy and energetic prose. Instead of managers and producers dismissing scripts continually as 'too literary,' and racking their brains to think of *anything* they can invent which will take the attention of the audience off the words; instead of demanding words as commonplace and colloquial as possible, with all the broken sentences, and dots and dashes of real speech, the Elizabethan managers scoured the town for poets who could provide the public with feasts of verbal beauty. Instead of searching for 'business' to avoid dialogue, and to make action implicit instead in movement or situation, the Elizabethans liked everything to be as explicit as possible in words.

And just as this use of language for its own sake had special functions in comedy, so in serious plays, too, its importance cannot be overrated. Dr. Johnson held modern views about dramatic values, when he criticized Shakespeare in this respect.

Narration in dramatic poetry is naturally tedious, as it is unanimated and inactive, and obstructs the progress of the ac-

tion. . . Shakespeare found it an encumbrance, and instead of lightening it by brevity, endeavoured to recommend it by dignity and splendour.

But Shakespeare wrote long speeches because his public enjoyed them. The play of his which has more long speeches than any other was the play written to please the jingo populace—*Henry V*. An audience, too, which was accustomed to listen with relish on Sundays to the sermons of Dr. Donne or of Lancelot Andrewes, was equally ready in the rest of the week to listen to long, closely argued poetic speeches about religion, kingship, government; and to all the grand old commonplaces concerning Death the Skeleton and Time the Shadow, and Farewells to Greatness, and All the World's a Stage.

These speeches were deliberately 'undramatic.' The actor suspended or transcended his part, as it were, just as he did in soliloquy; and though he may be ostensibly addressing a person in the play, he is really directly addressing the audience. He might express the whole essence of the play in this way, as Tamburlaine does addressing Cosroe, brother to the King of Persia.

The thirst of reign and sweetness of a crown
That caused the eldest son of heavenly Ops,
To thrust his doting father from his chair,
And place himself in the empyrial heaven,
Moved me to manage arms against thy state.
What better precedent than mighty Jove?
Nature that framed us off our elements,
Warring within our breasts for regiment,
Doth teach us all to have aspiring minds:
Our souls, whose faculties can comprehend
The wondrous architecture of the world,
And measure every wandering planet's course,
Still climbing after knowledge infinite,

And always moving as the restless spheres,
Will us to wear ourselves and never rest,
Until we reach the ripest fruit of all,
That perfect bliss and sole felicity,
The sweet fruition of an earthly crown.

Or the character might explain himself as Sejanus does.

Adultery! It is the lightest ill
I will commit: a race of wicked acts
Shall flow out of my anger and o'erspread
The world's wide face. . . .
On, then, my soul, and start not in thy course
Though Heaven drop thunder and hell belch out fire,
Laugh at the idle terrors: tell proud Jove
Between his power and thine there is no odds:
'Twas only fear first in the world made gods.

Or just recite a beautiful 'setpiece,' such as the description of the death of Ophelia, or (as only Shakespeare could do) begin by making a character analyze himself undramatically, and conclude with one of the most magnificent dramatic climaxes in all literature.

Soft you; a word or two before you go.
I have done the state some service, and they know't.
No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,
When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,
Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,
Nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely but too well;
Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand,
Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinal gum. Set you down this;
And say besides, that in Aleppo once,

Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk
Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
I took by the throat the circumcised dog
And smote him, thus! *(stabs himself)*

§

The Elizabethans were in many ways still an uncivilized and primitive people. They practiced racking, scourging and burning; they thought madness amusing and flocked to public executions, and they had none of the interest in things of the mind which we associate with the Athens of Pericles. Yet it is impossible not to believe that they supplied what Webster declared to be 'that which is the only grace and setting out of a tragedy, a full and understanding auditory.' The whole period covered by what we call the Elizabethan drama (though more than half of it is really Jacobean) is very short. Only sixty-six years separate the opening of the first public theatre in 1576 and the closing of all the play-houses in 1642. It would have been possible for one man in his lifetime to have seen every play of any importance during the whole course of that golden age. He would have seen enormous changes and developments in staging and in acting and in the whole spirit and outlook of the plays themselves, as well as in the quality of their writing. But during the whole time he would have found one element which remained constant—the representative quality of the audience. During the whole time, the theatre does seem to have been the expression of all that was most vital, most genuine and most joyous in the lives of the people, and to have received from them the most spontaneous and intelligent response. It was an audience of all classes, aristocrat and bourgeois, riff-raff and intelligentsia; and it was a

drama of all sorts, of sensationalism and buffoonery, of crude horror and romantic love, of satire and patriotism, of bawdry and moral passion, of rubbish and of riches. But, like the Greek drama, it drew its strength from the close co-operation between playwrights and populace. The people and the theatre understood one another, they stimulated one another, they drew vitality from one another. And, except in very specialized and local instances, they have never done so since.

THE MODERNS

IT IS SAID THAT NO NATION EVER accomplishes more than one age of dramatic greatness in its history. There have been great ages of drama in Greece, Spain, France and England, but there has never been a return of that greatness in any of them. To write of an age of the decay of the drama after dealing with its splendors is a depressing subject, but there is nevertheless a particular egotistical fascination about discussing our own age, merely because it is our own, and we belong to it. The perspective, of course, is bound to be different, for we know so much more about ourselves and our own age than we do about the past. Inevitably we romanticize the past, because we are ignorant of a great deal of it. It may be true that the evil that men do lives after them, while the good is oft interrèd with their bones, but it is one of the many advantages of literature over life that, in writing, it is the good which survives and is remembered, and the bad which perishes. The bad plays of the Greeks never reached the stage even in their own day, and though a great number of bad Elizabethan plays still exist, we shall probably never know to what depths of melodramatic rubbish and coarse clowning they frequently descended. When we come to examine our own age the picture is very different. There has been no selection com-

mittee of cultivated Athenians to choose out the best only for public performance, and the winnowing wings of time have not yet separated the wheat from the chaff. We are faced by the full spectacle of all the vulgarities and imbecilities and sheer triviality of the modern stage; and it is no wonder we are sometimes tempted to echo Mrs. Curdle's comment to Miss Snellicci, 'the drama is gone, perfectly gone.'

Yet it is most unjust to the dramatists of today to say so. As a matter of fact, if we compare the quality of our own drama with that of the Victorian drama, the change is quite striking. Even if we read Bernard Shaw's *Dramatic Opinions and Essays*, concerning plays in the nineties of the last century, we cannot help feeling that we really have more taste and more intelligence than the theatre and the society he pillories there. A middle-aged theatregoer today can make a substantial list of dramatists he has seen which are not to be snuffed at. In his youth, Shaw, Granville Barker, Galsworthy and that school, Yeats, Synge and the Irish school, and Somerset Maugham, all set a good standard; now he can continue to see Shaw (though he may wish to present him with a sprig of rosemary in remembrance of his impudent and exquisite maturity); Noel Coward, S. N. Behrman and Denis Johnston give him witty comedy; Sean O'Casey, Eugene O'Neill, Clifford Odets, Maxwell Anderson and Elmer Rice appeal in different ways to his intelligence and his emotions; and T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden present him with new experiments in the poetic play.

He lives, moreover, in a society which should be very favorable to the creation of dramatic art. Its freedom of speech is very wide, if we compare it with the conventions which have shackled it in the past. Although certain stage traditions still cling—such as that while blindness and spinal

disease are always tragic, deafness and indigestion are always comic—we have nevertheless considerably modified them. A wooden leg is still funny on the stage, but cripples in general, and lunatics and Jews and plain women in love are no longer inevitably comic, and there has been a complete revolution in the representation of domestic relations. No modern Byron need complain,

Romances paint at full-length people's wooings,
But only give the bust of marriages.

Our present stage shows the bust of marriages in quite a different sense, and we are only too willing to admit and to exploit for theatrical purposes, that love, far from being an ever-fixed mark, is of all things the most mutable. We are equally realistic on the subject of war, and in our view of the past, too, we are free of that tyrannous hagiology which demanded that every view of a great man should be colored by that sentiment which Joe Gargery wished, but could not afford to have, carved upon his rascally father's tombstone.

But whotsom'er the failings on his part,
Remember, reader, he were that good in his heart.

Besides this development in frankness and tolerance, which gives the drama a wider choice of theme than it has ever had before, it possesses stage conditions more flexible and adventurous than it has ever had before. Bernard Shaw gives a description of a serious poetic romance of the nineties where the standard of artistic and realistic production was illustrated by the heroine, having announced herself as an accomplished luteplayer, coming in with an imitation lyre, apparently wrenched from the pedals of an old-fashioned grand piano, and gracefully plucking with jeweled fingers at four substantial brass bars! Those days are certainly 'per-

fectly gone.' The present age has been one of marvelous development in the technical possibilities of stage illusion. A sky in the theatre of today can be an exact replica of a section of the heavens themselves, with four hundred stars each individually lighted with a separate electric lamp. The modern switchboard can produce miracles of 'atmosphere'; machinery can move the stage with incredible speed in incredibly complicated ways; and the designing of costumes and sets is a specialized branch of applied art into which some of the most distinguished talent of the age is poured. The standards of acting, moreover, if somewhat different, are not necessarily lower than those of former ages. Why is it that, in spite of all this, the appeal of the theatre continues to contract rather than to expand? For on the face of it it would appear that now is the moment when it should be a great civilizing and rationalizing force in the life of the individual and of society.

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There are, I think, two main reasons why it is so. The first is the lack of homogeneity in the potential audience. In all great ages of drama, the drama has played a very *serious* part in the lives of the people. They went to it not only for entertainment—though they got plenty of that, too—not only to hold the monotony of daily life in suspension by a brief interval of color, movement and laughter, but for a far wider and deeper kind of stimulus; for mental and spiritual food and refreshment. They went to be reminded that though daily life was sordid and ugly and monotonous and petty, man as a creature was not petty. Life was always difficult for him, for the great as well as for the small; for kings as well as for craftsmen, for duchesses as well as for

dairymaids. But though life might be difficult and fate unintelligible, man had moral and emotional and intellectual qualities within himself which could triumph over his fate, or at least make him superior to it. Love, courage, loyalty and self-knowledge were imperishable and unconquerable qualities. Man might be the victim of force or treachery or evil fortune or some weakness in his own nature: any of these might vanquish him and bring about his downfall. But though vanquished he need never be ignoble.

In England, from the days of the Puritan triumph onwards, the people have never again obtained their public spiritual food from the theatre: such as that food has been, it has been supplied by the churches. One great reason, therefore, for the decay of the drama, has been that it has ceased to be a popular art, in the sense of having the heart of the people in it and with it. It has become an entertainment, a 'show,' in which the deepest emotions of the audience have taken less and less part. And just as technically the stage has been removed further away from the audience, and its illusory character emphasized by distance and by artificial lighting, so in its reality it has moved away from the life of the audience, and has come to be regarded simply as an escape from the values of real life.

§

Why should this be?

The drama's laws the drama's patrons give,
For we that live to please, must please to live.

says Dryden, voicing the attitude that it is all the public's fault, and that the public must be given what it wants. But

that is only a half-truth: Chekov is nearer the whole truth when he writes,

The public can't be blamed for the rottenness of our theatres. The public are always and everywhere the same; intelligent and silly, kind and cruel—according to mood. It always was a flock which needs good shepherds and dogs, and has always gone where the shepherds and dogs drove it.

The Puritan shepherds and dogs drove it out of the theatre (with the best intentions) by threatening it with hell fire if it remained there, and once the representative character of the theatre audience disappeared, wealth and fashion turned the theatre into a preserve of its own. With the coming of democracy in the nineteenth century, a popular stage of a sort developed in vaudeville and melodrama, but Victorianism was hardly a very fruitful soil for it to grow in, and before any mentally sounder and more emotionally generous outlook could emerge, the shepherds and dogs, and the coming of the machine age, had driven the national audience into the cinema.

There the people are required to collaborate in the performance even less than they are in the modern theatre—indeed they are not required to collaborate at all. Instead of the actors on the stage being, as it were, the projected symbols of the spectators' response to the whole experience of life, from its profoundest spiritual and emotional significance, to its lightest mood of wholehearted buffoonery, they have nothing to do with the reality of life at all. They are the projected symbols of the spectator's daydreams of sex, of sophistication, of adventure, of wealth. The spectators themselves have nothing to do but sit back and absorb these visions without any conscious participation at all. They love them, because it is unnecessary to point out that it is always very

much easier to please people on a low level than on a high one. The only possibility of contenting a whole people with the best is to give them nothing but the best, as the Greeks did. But then the political idea of the Greeks was to encourage every member of the audience to be a rational, thinking human being, whereas any political idea which is behind the commercial film-makers is (if it is conscious at all) precisely the opposite. Its aim is to provide their own brand of 'opium for the masses,' which shall make the masses forget the realities of their daily lives. As one of its critics remarks: 'The popular cinema does not only cater for imbeciles, it breeds them.' It is a dope peddler. It aims at satisfying the longings for love, for riches, for travel, for splendor, for excitement, of millions and millions of emotionally starved and financially pinched men and women all over the world; longings which, if translated into organized action, instead of finding vicarious satisfaction from the plush seat of a cinema, would sweep away the present social system—including the film companies—in less than no time. It is no wonder Georges Duhamel called the commercial cinema 'this terrible machine for stupefying and destroying the mind,' and the cinema habit a pastime for slaves and the illiterate.

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Thus, although the standards of the intelligentsia are on the whole wider and more sensitive than those of fifty years ago, the hordes of the half-baked are much larger, and there are many stages of semi-literate nonentity in between. The purveyors of popular cinema entertainment have triumphed over the difficulty of the extreme social diversity of their audience by creating films with a level of interest in sex, in

excitement and in spectacle which shall appeal equally to the Chinese coolie, the Cambridge undergraduate and the Chicago factory worker. But on the slightly higher level of the 'legitimate' stage, the lack of any large common social and moral basis is continually felt. The Elizabethans, in spite of all differences in class and calling, were all in fundamental agreement about human attitudes and attributes, and the dramatists, in spite of the widest divergences in temperament and talent, were in a similar agreement. Indeed, they could and did collaborate with each other in a way which would be quite impossible in the present day. The scholarly Ben Jonson could make additions to Kyd's melodramatic *Spanish Tragedy*, or the high-brow Chapman cooperate with the popular Dekker, without doing any violence to their moral or intellectual integrity. But it would be difficult to imagine Mr. T. S. Eliot adding a few scenes to *Libel*, or Mr. Sean O'Casey or Mr. Clifford Odets collaborating in, say, *Call It A Day* or *Night Must Fall*.

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Any really civilized drama, therefore, must inevitably aim at a small section of the community, though it might be an ever-widening one. But its potential power is very adversely affected by what seems to me the second reason for the dramatic poverty of our age—the general quality of our theatre.

In the Introduction to this book, I suggested that in the present day the theatre had developed a very arrogant attitude towards drama—an attitude which it never appears to have had before—and which is symbolized by the arrival of a very vocal and self-assertive artist in the theatrical world—the producer or director.

We have seen how the producer as a professional artist emerged during the decadence of the Greek drama, and that we hear little of him during the great ages of dramatic creation, among the Greeks and the Elizabethans. There is a glimpse of him as an eighteenth-century type in Swift's *Letter to a Young Poet*, published in 1721.

I have heard, that a certain gentleman has great designs to serve the public in the way of their diversions, with due encouragement: that is if he can obtain some *yearly salary*, and handsome *contributions*: and well he deserves the favours of the nation; for, to do him justice, he has an uncommon skill in pastimes, having altogether applied his studies that way, and travelled full many a league, by sea and land, for this his profound knowledge. With that view alone he has visited all the courts and cities in Europe, and has been at more pains than I can speak of, to take an exact draught of the Play-house at The Hague, as a model for a new one here. . .

But in general, although there must obviously always have been someone whose business it was to co-ordinate all the elements which together form a theatrical performance—the script, the actors, the sets, the lighting, the grouping, the timing, and the mechanics of the stage—I think we may safely say that never before the present day has there been any figure in the theatre world who regarded himself as the present-day director is apt to do. As we read of a Meierhold or a Tairov and their methods, one is irresistibly reminded of the headmaster making his speech: 'What this school needs is co-operation; that means working under me.' This, for example, is how one American director describes the work of directing: 'The incessant interplay of theory and experiment, emotion and idea . . . movement and environment, picture and action, *which finally brings a script to life*' (my italics). The idea that the director is the creator of the play,

the corpse-reviver to a script, dead until touched into reality by him, is quite a new one. Until the present day, the stage-manager, as he used to be called, like the actors and designers, regarded himself as the humble interpreter of the playwright's intention. But I see that an actor has just left the cast of a new production because he disagrees with the author as to how the play should end, and from a recent interview with Mr. Norman-Bel Geddes¹ it is clear that the designer, too, regards the author as better left on the mat.

When asked what he considered the greatest limitation which the designer faced in the theatre, he said, 'Perhaps the greatest limitation is the playwright. . . . Too often he writes for Hollywood. He isn't getting the most he could out of the stage.'

The reference to Hollywood is cryptic; but as the account of Mr. Bel Geddes' work has been prefaced by the information that he refuses absolutely to read the playwright's stage directions, and insists on having a script in which they are omitted, one would have imagined that it was a little difficult for him to know *what* the playwright proposed to get out of the stage.

And indeed, when one sweeps away all the glamor and romance with which the office of director has now become surrounded, what is the truth of the matter? Surely that the better the dramatist, the less need he has of contributions in his own field from anybody else. There are, of course, many happy illustrations of collaborations between author and producer, but, in the main, a practiced dramatist is himself aware of the way in which his work will be most theatrically effective and writes it with that end continually in view. Moreover, it is seldom that a dramatist who is vitally interested in the writing of drama which shall appeal to the

¹ *Theatre Arts Monthly*, October, 1936.

heart and mind of his audience, wants anything elaborate in the way of production; whereas modern stage jugglery is so marvelous that it is natural that the director of its wonderland should want to get as much fun out of it as possible, and should not be much interested in plays unless they give scope for its exploitation. It is not surprising, then, that the drama should be in danger of being extinguished by its medium, the theatre.

That it is so extinguished in the opinion of the artists of the theatre is very clear. Listen to one of them on the subject of the Russian stage:

In spite of successive economic crises, the Soviet Theatre has grown to an amazingly fecund and vital national art. Under an absolutist political regime it has remained free to accomplish what most of the presumably free theatres of Europe and the United States still fumble for. Every variety of method is practised simultaneously . . . every degree of realism and stylization in acting, directing and stage setting.¹

It will be noted at once that the only kind of freedom which the author thinks to be of any importance at all in the theatre is the freedom to experiment in the *method* of producing plays. The freedom to say anything the dramatist may want to say is of no account at all. And so it is with the host of visitors to Russia from the theatre worlds of Europe and America. They all come back full of enthusiastic accounts of the Russian audiences, the Russian actors, the Russian artists and dancers and singers and technicians of the stage, and of the wonderful example of how the State can organize and endow theatrical entertainment.

Unfortunately, most of these enthusiasts are innocently convinced that well-organized theatrical entertainment is the same thing as drama. They come back bubbling over

¹ Lee Simonson.

with the marvelous work of the various *régisseurs* in representationalism, constructivism, functionalism, naturalism, formalism, synthetic realism and subjective idealism, but fail to notice that while the Russians have perfected the theatre as a wonderful instrument for the interpretation of drama, they unfortunately now have no contemporary drama of their own to interpret. And it can surely be no accident that the period of the glorification of the *régisseur*, and of concentration on the 'art of the theatre' in Russia, coincides with the period of the stultification of the Russian drama and of creative destitution among its dramatists.

The truth is, the worse the play, the more trivial its literary and psychological interest, the more a director can do for it. He can divert the attention of the audience towards extraneous matters—towards spectacle, lighting, décor, grouping, movement. He can mask its poverty of content by picturesque or startling additions: he can make it literally 'a good show' though it may be a very bad play. But no amount of slick or eccentric production can change the *quality* of a play, or can make the creation of a commonplace or vulgar mind into the creation of an original and distinguished one. And the work of an original and distinguished mind, served by good actors, asks very little of a director. It certainly does not ask him to create the play. And on that subject, perhaps, it is enough to say that though there are numberless examples of dramatists directing their own fine plays, there have so far been no examples of directors writing their own fine plays. No one of sense and taste wants to deny the good work that directors do, but at the moment their function, their value and their personal importance seem in danger of exaggeration. In the production of a child the midwife is not really of equal importance with the mother.

Where the director has real creative scope and opportunity

is in the revival of plays of a past age. For such plays, written originally for different stage conditions, and for a different quality of audience, a fresh interpretative artist is essential. In such circumstances the universality of a classic, whose own original stage technique is outmoded, can often be revealed by some bold stroke of setting or production. The performance of *Hamlet* in modern dress, for example, was such a revelation. It swept away all the familiar responses which had dulled and blunted the fresh impact of the story to the average theatregoer. One saw the play without a star hero in black tights occupying the center of the stage almost the whole time, and pushing the whole of the rest of the action into the background. One saw the King as the type of the eternal intriguer for power, instead of as a fairy-tale ogre with a sinister smile; and Ophelia as a poor bewildered young girl, snapping under a nervous and emotional strain she was not equal to, instead of as a conventional heroine in a white nightgown with straws in her hair and a basket of property flowers. By a new kind of production, the play took on a fresh dramatic significance to a modern audience. But that significance had, of course, always been there, in the script. It was the art of the theatre which was at fault before, and which was obscuring the art of the dramatist by an outworn theatrical convention.

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The modern exaltation of the producer weakens the position of intelligent drama because it lays the emphasis in the theatre upon method, not matter; while all the popular jargon in theatrical gossip and criticism about the importance of production inevitably shifts the attention of the average playgoer from content to stagecraft, and thus weakens his

capacity to receive any genuine social or human or intellectual sustenance from the theatre.

'Effectiveness' in the theatre becomes almost the sole criterion of judgment. A play such as *Reunion in Vienna*, for instance, has a record run in both New York and London, and is acclaimed as a most distinguished comedy, when, as a matter of fact, its matter and style contain the most commonplace veneer of up-to-date smartness, psychological clichés and good spirits, and its real achievement in the theatre was due entirely to the polished comedic brilliance of the two principal actors, and lay solely in its finished display of histrionic technique. Again, the most popular writer for the stage is Noel Coward, who, in spite of the verbal dexterity of his comedy, and the rich fertility of his invention, is simply the complete man of the theatre. Not the complete man of the theatre in the sense that Shakespeare was, or Molière—a man, that is, using every device available on his stage to help in the expression of his own individual vision of the whole of life, but a man of the theatre in the sense that his creative vision never leaves the theatre, that he never sees life at all except in terms of its effective representation on the stage. The stage is his master, not his servant: he is the supreme theatrical entertainer.

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There seems, indeed, no distinction whatever in the public mind between the two qualities of theatrical effectiveness and dramatic significance. Yet there is a very real distinction for those who care about the theatre and its place and value in the community, and it should be defined.

A play must, of course, be effective in the theatre to be a good play, but it all comes back to Chekov, and the eternal

struggle between the theatre and literature. It is a question of the *level* at which the dramatic artist works. Take the play of *Hamlet* for instance. Here Shakespeare takes the story of an old blood-and-thunder melodrama (probably already quite familiar to many of his audience), much as a modern author might choose the plot of some famous detective story. He takes nothing from it. Audiences of all ages enjoy thrills, and Shakespeare gives them full measure: five deaths on the stage, three appearances of a ghost, a dumb-show of another murder, a play within the play, a mad woman, a fight in an open grave at a funeral, a fencing match, stabbing, drowning, poison, pirates, an angry mob, soldiers marching, cannon firing. Comic relief too, with several 'character parts' and some snatches of dirty songs. It was a grand theatrical entertainment, and no doubt a considerable section of the audience loved it at that level and left it there. But Shakespeare himself was not content with theatrical effectiveness; he aimed at dramatic significance. He takes the characters of this old revenge melodrama, and stuffs them to overflowing with his own vitality. Out of their mouths, creating these personalities, come *words*—words which stir the spirit, and kindle the senses, and surprise and delight the mind, and melt the heart. And finally by means of these words he creates a hero in whom he expresses all that he has ever felt of the beauty, the cruelty, the mystery of the world, and the complexity of the human spirit, alone, and in relation to his fellows.

What, then, are plays which are 'dramatically significant'? They are plays which are both theatrically effective, and which contain, as well, some real interpretation and illumination of our human life: plays which do not only please at one level of satisfaction—that of entertainment value—but which satisfy us as complete human beings. Plays which are

theatrically effective, which are 'good theatre,' please us in the theatre. They live vividly on the stage, but have no life outside it: they neither heighten nor enlarge the mind and the imaginations of the audience. They pass an evening, and with the evening they pass. Compare, for example, the quality of two plays produced last year in New York, whose subjects are in some sort comparable: *Dead End* by Sidney Kingsley and *Winterset* by Maxwell Anderson. The action of the first is chosen for the specifically stage values of its episodes: there is nothing organic about it, and the characters exist only in the episodes in which they appear, in the moments they are on the stage, and for the specifically theatrical value of those moments. They are constructed to fit certain parts required for the social significance of the theme: they are not created in terms of general human nature. Their actions are purely arbitrary—very effectively manufactured to produce immediate emotional responses, but not in conformity with any laws of living other than those of the theatre. We see their *behavior*; we know nothing of what they *are*. And the whole is played out against a scene of street urchins continually clambering dripping wet from the supposed river in front of the stage; a scene of pictorial jugglery which is the real core of the play's values.

There is nothing of all this in *Winterset*. Nothing here is episodic and arbitrary. The story is built with a structural span and sweep as taut and resilient as that of the bridge which gives the background to its action. The play is as full of telling theatrical situations as *Dead End*, but they are situations which arise naturally and inevitably from the interplay of the characters and the action, and they are steeped in that *irony* which is one of the sure tests of dramatic value. For nothing which is purely arbitrary can be ironic. We are in the theatre, but we are in the presence of

living creatures from the world of men, and the love and suffering and torture and revenge which surround them are those of common humanity. Nor do they belong only to the world of the play as we listen to their voices. When Esdras talks to Miriamne at the close of the second scene:

Miriamne. Is it better

to tell a lie and live?

Esdras. Yes, child. It's better.

Miriamne. But if I had to do it—

I think I'd die.

Esdras. Yes, child. Because you're young.

Miriamne. Is that the only reason?

Esdras. The only reason.

Or in the great scene in the second act where the judge and Mio argue: or in the final scene where hope struggles into a pale gleam before being finally extinguished, and we live in an oasis of love and faith and courage—the scenes possess that sure sign of greatness, they become transformed from the particular to the general. The words are the words of actors upon the stage, but the implications and overtones are eternal and universal.

Winterset asks very little of director or scenic artist. It has the basis of all fine drama in it: it reveals the human spirit directly, by spoken word and action. It would lose little if it were played on bare boards, and it demands an *audience* rather than *spectators*. It needs a *theatre* full of men and women who *listen* as well as *look*, and who use their ears in order to see and feel beyond what is actually in the theatre; who reach out beyond the illusion of the moment, and in a sympathetic fusion with the actors on the stage, unite in that age-old unconscious ritual of vicarious sacrifice, by which the human spirit is lightened of its burdens,

and even in the contemplation of the profoundest suffering, finds harmony and peace.

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That an audience of this quality is so small in present-day London or New York seems to me the result of the two reasons I have already given: the lack of a homogeneous body of society with any strong communal moral and intellectual assumptions and emotional feelings, and the overemphasis everywhere of the elements of 'production' and theatre craft in general. All this overemphasis, while it seriously handicaps the literary quality of the drama, does not even accomplish what it presumably sets out to do—it does not fill the theatres—and for a very good reason. The section of the modern audience which is really interested primarily in 'the art of the theatre'—that is, in the visual and musical aspects of theatrical entertainment—deserts the theatre proper for the ballet, or becomes engrossed in the purely 'artistic' and technical aspects of the cinema, which give infinitely wider scope for the use of visual and musical rhythm, pattern, design, and their interrelations. Meanwhile the lovers of the drama, who want real plays which are about something and say something, sit at home and read the plays of the real dramatists, instead of going to the theatre where they know that nine times out of ten they will have to watch exhibitions of 'the art of the theatre,' with any amount of good acting and sophisticated production wasted on presenting a mixture of sentimental flapdoodle and topical journalism, and in creating second-rate characters involved in second-rate problems, which would never arise if they were possessed of principle, and which would be imme-

diately solved if they were possessed of common-sense. The only real community spirit in the present day, indeed, seems to be in the theatres of the Left political party, where the audience really do care about the subject matter of the plays, and where alone it is the rule and not the exception to feel that real sense of the theatre—the sense of something deeply interfused between actors and audience, real liveliness and power generated between them and affecting both.

Not, of course, that lovers of the drama want it to be nothing but earnest political propaganda, even if it is good drama at the same time. There is plenty of room in the theatre for every kind of dramatic entertainment, and one's quarrel with the present-day theatre is not that it produces too much *light* entertainment, but that it produces too much *bad* entertainment. Everybody, from the time of the Greeks onwards, has gone to the theatre to be amused as well as to be emotionally stimulated, and it does not matter how limited or trivial or absurd a play is as long as it is consistent with its own world, or true to its own key, or whatever image we care to use. No one criticizes a farce for being farcical, or an artificial comedy for being artificial, or a romance for being romantic, or a fantasy for being fantastic. They set out to be so, and provided the conventions of each type are accepted as part of the illusion, each can be thoroughly enjoyed in its own way. But if a play sets out to be a serious comment on, or interpretation of, life itself, it should consistently be so. If, for the sake of theatrical effect or incident, character is falsified or emotion distorted; if part of the play is in one key and part in another; if, in a realistic environment, people behave as if they were in the worlds of farce or of romance; if the whole thing is humanly unconvincing and superficial no amount of brilliant acting, effective individual episodes and polished production will turn it into

a good play. It may be 'good theatre,' but as far as true dramatic values go it remains a dead end and an idiot's delight, and though it may be 'clapper-clawed with the palms of the vulgar,' the 'judicious' will continue to grieve. In moments of depression it appears as if it is now accepted that the theatre is a place where women go to relax after a morning's shopping, and men go to be soothed after the enormous intellectual strain of a day in the office. If this *is* the level on which the large majority of the public like to be entertained, and on which the theatrical shepherds and dogs are going to see to it that they are entertained, any real interest in the stage will continue to live only in small and scattered groups; and the number of plays which please real lovers of the drama will continue to be extremely limited.

THE DRAMATIST AS ARTIST

DRAMA AND LIFE

IN THE PREFACE TO *Three Plays for Puritans*, Bernard Shaw declares:

The writing of practicable stage plays does not present an infinite scope to human talent, and the playwrights who magnify its difficulties are humbugs. . . . I defy anyone to prove that the great epoch makers in fine art have ever owed their position to their technical skill. . . . It is the philosophy, the outlook on life, that changes, not the craft of the playwright.

Shaw, of course, always speaks of an artist in terms of his moral value, since that is his standard of importance in the artistic world; but as we read this we are reminded again of what Konstantin Treplev says in *The Seagull*:

I come more and more to the conviction that it is not a question of new and old forms, but that what matters is that a man should write without thinking about forms at all, write because it springs freshly from his soul.

What springs freshly from the writer's soul includes everything which makes him what he is, his whole compass of mind and heart, but it is impossible to separate that from the forms in which it is expressed, for it is only through them that it is made articulate and can communicate itself to an

audience. The truth of the matter is that if what springs from the soul of the playwright is fresh and passionate and profound, it will inevitably drive through to an individual form of expression, as a river channels its bed. Art will find a way.

The real interest in the study of drama is to see how serious artists—serious in artistic intent, that is, whether they happen to write tragedy or comedy—all bound by the strict limitations of dramatic form and theatrical performance, have molded and adapted and varied that form to produce their general and their particular effects. For dramatic method is a very much larger subject than mere stage technique. It includes every means of expression which the artist can command to deepen and widen his implications; every device he uses to make his aim more fully conscious and more finely discriminated. It is not a set of rules to be applied to any given material, it is the servant of the creative impulse which rules within; and the most important thing in dramatic criticism, therefore, is not to analyze the mere craft of the playwright, but to share his intuitions, to feel the essential quality of his creative genius. He is not the dispenser of a theatrical bag of tricks, he is an artist creating a work of art, which he is striving by every means at his disposal to make as vivid and vigorous as he can. He is not aiming to reduce experience to what is immediately effective on the stage, but to make his stage somehow adapt itself to the revelation of his experience. He is limited as every writer for the stage is limited—limited in time, in space, in medium—and his problem is how much work can he get out of such tools as he has: how can he deepen and expand the form at his disposal to make it hold as much of mind and spirit as he can pour into it—How can he turn Life into Art?

Now there are certain direct ways, and certain oblique, probably semi-conscious ways, in which we can watch the creative process working itself out in dramatic art. Of these, the most obvious direct way is by *speech*. The basis of the dramatist's art must always be his use of speech through the mouths of his characters upon the stage. The construction of a plot must be the skeleton of any play, but dramatic dialogue is its blood and breath. The whole question of 'style' in drama is a very subtle and elusive one, much neglected in dramatic criticism. One can discuss the construction of a play, its theme, its situations, its characters, and the interrelation of all these aspects of it, and yet its essential quality may elude one. What is it which generates that inner excitement and delight in the theatre which springs into being as soon as the figures in a fine play begin to speak; or which will sometimes appear and disappear in the course of a play, marking the ebb and flow of the dramatic inspiration? It is the true dramatic essence, something which can never come by effort, but is unmistakable in its presence. It is not in the least the same thing as verbal brilliance or idiosyncrasy. There are some plays which live by their 'style' in this sense. The plays of Congreve or Oscar Wilde, for instance, have no life, outside theatrical situations, but the life of witty expression. Their world is the world of polished phrase, and sharp, clean hammer-blows of hitting the epigrammatic nail on the head over and over again. Or the plays of Maeterlinck or Synge's *Riders to the Sea* live entirely by a rhythmic verbal magic which submerges any other interest, and creates worlds of musical speech which are all their own. But the true dramatic essence is something far deeper than these surface effects of patterned language. It is some mysterious injection of energy into the dialogue which creates value in words quite beyond their apparent significance. The words

outline a situation, perhaps, but there is something in them which creates an element floating free of the situation, and which yet gives it its unforgettable quality.

Cassius. Brutus, bait not me;
I'll not endure it: you forget yourself,
To hedge me in; I am a soldier, I,
Older in practice, abler than yourself
To make conditions.

Brutus. Go to; you are not, Cassius.

Cassius. I am.

Brutus. I say you are not.

Cassius. Urge me no more, I shall forget myself;
Have mind unto your health, tempt me no further.

Brutus. Away, slight man!

Cassius. Is't possible?

Brutus. Hear me, for I will speak.
Must I give way and room to your rash choler?
Shall I be frightened when a madman stares?

Cassius. O ye gods, ye gods! must I endure all this?

Brutus. All this! ay, more: fret till your proud heart break;
Go show your slaves how choleric you are,
And make your bondmen tremble. Must I budge?
Must I observe you? Must I stand and crouch
Under your testy humour? By the gods,
You shall digest the venom of your spleen,
Though it do split you; for, from this day forth,
I'll use you for my mirth, yea, for my laughter,
When you are waspish.

Cassius. Is it come to this?

Brutus. You say you are a better soldier:
Let it appear so; make your vaunting true,
And it shall please me well: for mine own part
I shall be glad to learn of noble men.

Cassius. You wrong me every way; you wrong me, Brutus;
I said an elder soldier, not a better:
Did I say, better?

Brutus. If you did, I care not.

Cassius. When Caesar lived, he durst not thus have moved me.

Brutus. Peace, peace! you durst not so have tempted him.

Cassius. I durst not?

Brutus. No!

Cassius. What, durst not tempt him?

Brutus.

For your life you durst not.

Cassius. Do you not presume too much upon my love;

I may do that I shall be sorry for.

Brutus. You have done that you should be sorry for.

This is just two men quarreling on the stage, but what is it in the language and its movement which seems to subdue us instantly into the atmosphere of jangling nerves and emotional tension which possesses them: which seems to swell, line by line, iteration by iteration, echo by echo, into a raging tide of pent-up exasperation within them, which seems to give actual body to the mounting vehemence of hostility, impatience and contempt which is seething in their hearts? By some means the dialogue is charged with a dynamic force, the use of language has a power which belongs to dramatic art alone. And this quality does not, of course, only belong to scenes of emotional intensity and pressure. In modern plays it is continuously present, for example, in Chekov, subtly building up the anti-climaxes which, in his art, replace the climaxes of earlier dramatists, and though it may seem a far cry from Shakespeare to Clifford Odets, it is that same dramatic energy which vitalizes Odets' dialogue, which suddenly releases profundities of simplicity, and thwarted desire, and agonies of heartache, distress and nervous strain in the clipped, snapping conversation of Hennie, her mother and Moe Axelrod at the end of the first act of *Awake and Sing*, with the accompaniment of the gentle inconsequence of Myron. Hennie is pregnant, Bessie (her mother), insists that she marry Sam Feinscreiber; Moe wants her, but not marriage.

Bessie. We're soon losing our Hennie, Moe.

Moe. Why? What's the matter?

Bessie. She made her engagement.

Moe. Zat so?

Bessie. When a mother gives away an only daughter it's no joke. Wait till you'll get married you'll know. . . .

Moe (bitterly). Don't make me laugh—when I get married! What I think a women? Take 'em all, cut 'em in little pieces like a herring in Greek salad. A guy in France had the right idea—dropped his wife in a bathtub fulla acid. (*Whistles.*) Sss, down the pipe. Pppfft—not even a corset button left.

Myron. Corsets don't have buttons.

Moe (to Hennie). What's the great idea? Gone big time, Paradise? Christ, it's suicide! Sure, kids you'll have, gold teeth, get fat, big in the tangerines—

Hennie. Shut your face!

Moe. Who's it—some dope pulling down twenty bucks a week? Cut your throat, sweetheart. Save time. . . .

Hennie. My God, do I need it—to listen to this mutt shoot his mouth off?

Myron. Please. . . .

Moe. Now wait a minute, sweetheart, wait a minute. I don't have to take that from you.

Bessie. Don't yell at her!

Hennie. For two cents I'd spit in your eye.

Moe (throwing coin to table). Here's two bits. (*Hennie looks at him and then starts across the room.*)

Bessie. Where are you going?

Hennie (crying). For my beauty nap, Mussolini. Wake me up when it's apple blossom time in Normandy. (*Exits*)

Moe. Pretty, pretty—a sweet girl, your Hennie. See the look in her eyes?

Bessie. She don't feel well. . . .

Myron. Canned goods. . . .

Myron. I remember that song. . . . beautiful. Nora Bayes sang it at the old Proctor's Twenty-third Street—'When It's Apple Blossom Time in Normandy.' . . .

Moe. She wantsa see me crawl—my head on a plate she wants!
A snowball in hell's got a better chance. (*Out of sheer
fury he spins the quarter in his fingers.*)

Myron (*as his eyes slowly fill with tears*). Beautiful. . . .

Moe. Match you for a quarter. Match you for any goddam thing
you got. (*Spins the coin viciously.*) What the hell kind
of house is this it ain't got an orange!!

§

Another direct way in which the dramatist exposes the quality of his genius, and which is obviously closely related to his command of dynamic speech, is the way he reveals character, and the *amount* of it which he is able to reveal. We have already said that it is impossible to convey extreme subtlety of character on the stage. Neither the time at the dramatist's disposal nor the character of his medium allow of it. The methods of Proust or Virginia Woolf are the antipodes of the methods of the playwright. Even the Elizabethans, though through soliloquy they could extend the limits of drama to include unspoken thought, never succeed in approaching the novel in this respect. Hamlet is complex in his variety of *mood*, but some of his complexities are really inconsistencies. It is not because he appears to be both an extravert and an introvert, a man of action and a man of thought, a man of honor and a cad, that he is interesting, but because of the intensity with which the main theme of his meditative and tortured imagination is presented throughout.

Strindberg protested against the simplicities of dramatic characterization and declared that he created complexities:

My souls are conglomerates, made up of past and present stages of civilization, scraps of humanity, torn off pieces of

sundry clothing turned into rags—all patched together as is the human soul itself.

But the result is that they *appear* patched on the stage, or else develop into the obscurities of *The Spook Sonata*. Shakespeare seldom even tried to make his characters develop. Angelo, Macbeth, Lady Macbeth and Lear are the only ones who change much, I think. He has a trick of making us see them through the eyes of other characters, however, which is one way of giving them a wider life. We see Macbeth through the vision of his wife.

Yet do I fear thy nature:
It is too full o' the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way: thou wouldst be great;
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it.

Or we listen to Enobarbus describing Cleopatra, or Ulysses Cressida, or see Hotspur as he appears to Prince Hal.

He that kills me some six or seven dozen of Scots at a breakfast, washes his hands, and says to his wife 'Fie upon this quiet life! I want work.'

And of course Shakespeare always enlarges his plots so richly by the easy audacity with which he will admit the real world into his romantic and historical world, and by some magic avoid any sense of incongruity at all. We pass from the presence of the King and his nobles in the palace, and the atmosphere of high affairs of state, to an inn-yard before dawn lit by the lanterns of a party of grumbling flea-bitten carriers, with the fresh air of the morning mingled with the smell of their packages of peas and beans, bacon and ginger; while side by side with the agonies and crimes of prehistoric kings or medieval Italians, we see good honest English gravediggers and countrymen and nurses and por-

ters carrying on their daily occupation quite undisturbed and unperturbed by the atmosphere of high tragedy. To realize the brilliance with which Shakespeare creates these things, we have only to see T. S. Eliot trying to do something of the same sort in the comments of the Four Knights on the murder of Becket: or to hear his chorus speak of themselves as 'the small folk drawn in to the pattern of Fate, the small folk who live among small things' and feel the complete lack of conviction we have about their really being anything of the sort.

But it is natural that the most obvious direct illustrations of creative genius should be *moments* of character revelation. Shakespeare had the trick of that from the time he started to write. Is there anything more human in all his work than Costard's excuses when Sir Nathaniel, the curate, has disgraced himself in his effort to take the part of Alexander the Great in the pageant of the Nine Worthies?

There, an't shall please you; a foolish mild man; an honest man, look you, and soon dashed. He is a marvellous good neighbour, faith, and a very good bowler—but, for Alisander,—alas, you see how 'tis,—a little o'erparted.¹

Or take that little scene in *Antony and Cleopatra*² where Antony, just when he is beginning to lose our sympathy, takes farewell of his servants. It takes us by surprise as much as it does Cleopatra and Enobarbus, but Antony suddenly becomes a most lovable man again. Or finally, a moment in Chekov which transcends any I know for fusing tears and laughter—that moment in *The Three Sisters*, when Kuligin puts on a false beard and whiskers in a wistful clumsy effort to cheer up his wife for the loss of her lover.

¹ *Love's Labour's Lost* V, ii.

² IV, ii.

§

But the amount which can be conveyed in dramatic form in quite direct ways—by a frontal attack on the material, so to speak—is limited. If we examine any fine play, we immediately become aware of various oblique ways in which our minds and emotions have been reached and touched into response, and which have resulted in an added sense of depth and width in our awareness of the creative process.

A work of art is a unity of relationships within a formal structure, and as soon as we begin to think of the structure of a piece of dramatic art, we become aware that its parts exist for us in two orders of consciousness at the same time: they exist in time and in space.¹ First of all a play exists as a story in time; a series of events in a causal sequence. These are created by the direct methods I have mentioned; by vivid dramatic dialogue which interrelates character and action, and gives vitality and intensity to both. But beyond this, a play exists as a collection of abstract elements which function within the movement of the story in time, and may be called its spatial reality. A character, for instance, is revealed in the actual sequence of events by what he *does*, but what he *is* may be revealed in ways which are quite independent of the plot. The 'spatial reality' of a play may appear in many ways. It can be apparent in a grouping of moods and emotions corresponding roughly to the arrangement of the plastic elements in a painting; or in a treatment of themes comparable to the same elements in a musical composition; or it may live in an atmosphere *through* which the temporal events are viewed; or in some symbolic or emo-

¹ I am indebted for suggestions on this subject to *The Wheel of Fire* by G. Wilson Knight, and *The Jacobean Drama* by U. M. Ellis-Fermor.

tional flavor which gives the temporal events some special significance.

The relation between these two orders of consciousness in dramatic experience is very variable. They may merge and fuse so that it is impossible to think of one without the other. To take a simple instance: in Shaw's *St. Joan* it is difficult to separate the actual telling of the story from the emergence of the quite distinct intellectual pattern which comes through it. As Shaw himself says, 'it is the business of the stage to make its figures more intelligible to themselves than they would be in real life; for by no other means can they be made intelligible to the audience.' Thus by clarifying the characters of Warwick, Cauchon and Lemaître in the action, he at the same time reveals the abstract pattern of warring forces which he has built up inside the temporal events of the story, and which is its real significance. Another similar example is Galsworthy's *Loyalties*, where the fable is inseparable from the theme which interpenetrates it.

But the spatial element may predominate very greatly. In Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* it is purely his attitude towards the story, everything he uses it to illustrate, not the facts themselves, which interest us. Or in Webster's *Duchess of Malfi*, although there is an embarrassment of chaotic incident and accident in the plot, it is the grouping of moods and personalities, the sense of the warp and woof of reflection and groping introspection which is going on all the time beneath the melodramatic action, which is the real life of the play. In *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekov dispenses with plot altogether as a vital element. The events in time, that little trickle of action which runs through it, are so tenuous as to be almost negligible. This does not mean that the characters are not vividly individualized, but that it is their *static* relationships in which we are really interested. We

know, as soon as we see what Madame Ranevsky is, that the cherry orchard will be lost, but what absorbs us is the theme of the interrelation of all that the cherry orchard stands for, with that group of characters and their moods and emotions. It is not the *facts* that they live through in the play which matters, it is the *quality of their living* which matters. It is the revelation of their charm, their inconsequence and incompetence; their mingling of genuine emotion with triviality of spirit, their infinite incapacity for action and their infinite capacity for self-criticism; the way in which Chekov reveals them in small action and gesture among material things—drinking a cup of coffee, kissing an old man, stroking a piece of furniture, hunting a pair of galoshes. It is all this which is the reality of the play—a spatial reality. Clifford Odets creates a very similar effect in *Awake and Sing*, where what happens to the characters is somewhat unconvincing, and what they *are* is the only real concern of the dramatist. In *The Silver Box* we can see the opposite effect. The temporal relationships, the interconnections of action and character as they function in constructing theatrical plot, are almost the whole effect of the play. The pity and irony of it all spring from the facts of the story, not from any emotional coloring which is created in any other way. The cherry orchard is a symbol, which spreads its influence through the being of everyone who lives in the play: the silver box is a silver cigarette box, simply a concrete object, which plays an important part in a story; nothing is revealed about any character by his relation to it.

§

But let us focus these two areas of vision as they appear in a single play—and we will choose a play which seems on

the face of it to be a simple and straightforward enough story—*Hedda Gabler*.

Ibsen wrote of his aim.

It was not my desire to deal in this play with so-called social problems. What I principally wanted to do was to depict human beings, human emotions and human destinies, upon a groundwork of certain of the social conditions and principles of the present day.

The only social condition and principle which really affects the conception of the play is the basic one of the position of women. Ibsen said that he called it *Hedda Gabler* because, as a personality, Hedda is to be regarded rather as her father's daughter than as her husband's wife, and the central social condition behind the story is the fact that for a young woman in Hedda's position there was no career possible except that of matrimony, and that for a girl without fortune, and without the courage to risk poverty with a man who had his way to make, the choice of possible husbands was extremely limited. It was a condition of things which made it seem more profitable for a Hedda Gabler who hadn't the necessary pluck to choose a Lovborg, to marry a George Tesman than not to be married at all. Without this social environment and background the play could not exist, and we accept it as axiomatic. Spatially, that is the *area* of the play: the composition of living human beings, human emotions and human destinies is mapped on that area.

There is one great pivotal figure, Hedda herself, who is the center of the dramatic experience in both time and space. Hedda is a study of utterly ruthless egotism. Gifted with beauty, intelligence and wit, she is without a single spark of emotional warmth, intellectual interest, or moral idealism. To suit her own comfort and convenience, to satisfy her own

appetite for sensation or for power, to flatter her own vanity, she will sacrifice anything and anybody. The play opens with her return from her wedding journey. She is clearly completely bored by her husband, but has hopes of his achieving a substantial academic position. In a conversation with Mrs. Elvsted, she hears that Eilert Lovborg, a young man who had disturbed her emotionally in the past, has not only been redeemed from a life of debauchery by Mrs. Elvsted, but has, with her help, written a book which has made a considerable stir. In a further conversation, with Judge Brack, she and her husband learn that it is possible that Lovborg may be offered the professorship which Tesman had thought he was sure of for himself. Summoned by Tesman, who has real feelings of friendship for him, Lovborg comes to the house, bringing the manuscript of his next book. He is persuaded by Hedda to break his resolutions against drinking and to go with Brack and Tesman to a bachelor party at the Judge's house. He does not return as he has promised, to take Mrs. Elvsted home, and next morning Tesman describes how, as Judge Brack and some of his friends were taking Lovborg home, drunk, he dropped the manuscript of the book, which he, Tesman, picked up and has brought home. Tesman then leaves the house to go to one of his old aunts, who is dying, so that when Lovborg himself comes in later, it is only Hedda and Mrs. Elvsted who see him. He is humiliated by his weakness, and declares that he has torn up his manuscript. Horrified, Mrs. Elvsted leaves, and then Lovborg confesses to Hedda that really he has lost the manuscript. He thinks he took it with him to the house of a former mistress of his he had revisited the night before, and that it was stolen from him there, and he is too ashamed to tell Mrs. Elvsted the truth. In his despair he feels that suicide is the only way out, and Hedda pretends to agree.

She gives him one of her pistols, and as soon as he has gone, fetches the manuscript and burns it in the stove. When Judge Brack brings the news of Lovborg's death to the Tesmans and Mrs. Elvsted, Mrs. Elvsted discloses that she still has all the notes of the book, and Tesman declares that he will dedicate himself to rewriting it if she will help him. As they plunge into the work, Judge Brack draws Hedda aside and tells her that he recognized her pistol, and that he has it in his power to involve her in a very unpleasant scandal. The price of his silence is that she shall consent to an amorous intrigue with him. She moves into the inner room—a few banal remarks are exchanged—there is a shot, and she is discovered dead.

This bald version of the facts omits all the subtleties of the telling of the story, all the vigor and clarity of the figures, all the variations in pace and flow, all the gradual tightening of the interest and excitement up to the bursting point of the final shot. But it shows roughly how Hedda is revealed by the events of which she is the center. What she *does* in the story creates her as an unforgettable figure. But the total effect is enormously enriched and deepened by the composition of the abstract elements which form an equally important part of the dramatic material, by the contrasts and the related rhythms between herself and the human beings around her. There is only one other character in the play who is an egotist too, Judge Brack, and the shifting relationship between him and Hedda from the beginning to the end of the play is one of the main psychological interests; but it is in the grouping about her of the figures of Miss Tesman, of her husband, and of Mrs. Elvsted, that Hedda's 'values' in the composition emerge most vividly. The several degrees and qualities of selflessness in these three reveal her as much as they reveal themselves. Before Hedda

has even appeared, she has begun to take shape. Miss Tesman comes to call the morning after their arrival, and is welcomed by her nephew.

Tesman. Aunt Julia! Dear Aunt Julia! Come all this way—so early!

Miss Tesman. Why, of course I had to come and see how you were getting on.

Tesman. In spite of your having had no proper night's rest?

Miss Tesman. Oh, that makes no difference to me.

Tesman. Well, I suppose you got home all right from the pier? Eh?

Miss Tesman. Yes, quite safely, thank goodness. Judge Brack was good enough to see me right to my door.

Tesman. We were so sorry we couldn't give you a seat in the carriage. But you saw what a pile of boxes Hedda had to bring with her.

Miss Tesman. Yes, she had certainly plenty of boxes.

That picture of Hedda and Tesman driving off behind the pile of boxes, while old Aunt Julia, who has gone down to the pier to meet them in the middle of the night, is left to find her own way home, suggests more than much description. So does the scene between Hedda and Mrs. Elvsted, where the woman who puts love before every consideration of safety or self sits beside the woman who puts every personal consideration before love. But more poignant and searching than anything else is the scene where Miss Tesman speaks of the death of her sister, and of her own future, and the relation of that scene with those before and after it. We have just watched Hedda deliberately destroy the happiness of a loving woman and the life of a brilliant man. To feed her own sense of power, to prevent at all costs another woman from being to Lovborg what she might have been herself, to destroy utterly the book, the symbol of their union, she keeps silence about her possession of the manuscript, puts

the pistol into Lovborg's hand as she sends him to his death, and then crouches over the stove, cramming the leaves of paper fiercely into the fire, and whispering the horrible words, 'Now I am burning your child, Thea!—Burning it, curly-locks! Your child and Eilert Lovborg's. I am burning—I am burning your child.'

This scene of relentless jealousy and egotism is followed by that in which Miss Tesman comes to the house after the death of the invalid sister to whom for years she had devoted all her care.

Hedda. You will feel lonely now, Miss Tesman.

Miss Tesman. Just at first, yes. But that will not last very long I hope. I daresay I shall soon find an occupant for poor Rina's little room.

Hedda. Indeed? Who do you think will take it? Eh?

Miss Tesman. Oh, there's always some poor invalid or other in want of nursing, unfortunately.

Hedda. Would you really take such a burden upon you again?

Miss Tesman. A burden! Heaven forgive you, child—it has been no burden to me.

Hedda. But suppose you had a total stranger on your hands—

Miss Tesman. Oh, one soon makes friends with sick folk; and it's such an absolute necessity for me to have someone to live for. Well, heaven be praised, there may soon be something in this house, too, to keep an old aunt busy.

Hedda. Oh, don't trouble about anything here.

And to complete the whole composition, this is again followed by a scene between Tesman and Hedda, which gives yet another angle and lighting from which we see these themes of love, self, and the fruits of union. Hedda confesses to her husband that she has burnt the manuscript.

Tesman. But how could you do anything so unheard of? What put it into your head? What possessed you? Answer me that. Eh?

Hedda (*suppressing an almost imperceptible smile*). I did it for your sake, George.

Tesman. For my sake!

Hedda. This morning, when you told me about what he had read to you—

Tesman. Yes, yes—what then?

Hedda. You acknowledged that you envied him his work.

Tesman. Oh, of course I didn't mean that literally.

Hedda. No matter—I couldn't bear the idea that anyone should throw you into the shade.

Tesman (*in an outburst of mingled doubt and joy*). Hedda! Oh, is this true? But—but—I never knew you show your love like that before. Fancy that!

Hedda. Well, I may as well tell you that—just at this time—(*impatiently breaking off*) No, no; you can ask Aunt Julia. She will tell you, fast enough.

Tesman. Oh, I almost think I understand you, Hedda! Great heavens! do you really mean it! Eh?

Hedda. Don't shout so. The servant might hear.

Would it be possible to reveal and contrast and relate character, mood and emotion more vividly and economically than in the 'spatial rhythm' of these three scenes? And it will be noticed that in this moving from the practical course of events to the plane of abstract pattern, we have become free from all the shackles of the material world. Not only is our vision of the temporal events widened and enriched, but we move beyond them. Actually we remain for three hours in a stuffy Norwegian sitting-room in the late nineteenth century, watching a group of commonplace bourgeois men and women involved in commonplace domestic relations, and in rather a sordid story of mercenary marriage, wasted talent, amorous intrigue, jealousy, drink and suicide. And from this ugly little room, with its knickknacks and anti-macassars, the mind shoots and soars away to thoughts of the eternal pattern of the universe, to the endless rhythms

of loyalty and selfishness, of love and jealousy, of the material and the spiritual, of the human body and the human mind. The characters, that is, in addition to their own vivid personal life, become symbols of general and universal things; their implications stretch far beyond themselves.

This kind of expansion of the characters from the particular to the general is a quality in all fine drama, but Ibsen frequently uses symbolism as an element in the spatial treatment of his material in a far more conscious way than he does in *Hedda Gabler*. The naturalistic plot of *The Master Builder*, for instance, has a mystical counterpart of abstract implications which keeps pace with it throughout; the white horses of Rosmersholm, which tradition has it are the spirits of dead Rosmers returning, while they symbolize the spirit of Beata, which lives on in the household, embody also the idea of all tradition and all the dead pasts which live on and haunt the living present; while the wild duck, with its clear parallel with the Ekdal family, who, like a wounded duck, sink never to rise again, symbolizes also, in its actual existence in the attic, all the illusions, the 'make-believe' by which the family go on living. Indeed the very vagueness and width of its implications give it an added power.

§

Some method of enlarging the scope of realistic drama is, indeed, a necessity, if it is to be anything but an art of surface depth only. The great myths and heroic stories of the Greeks gave them a body of material which provided their dramatists with plots whose validity and ethical structure were bound up with the deepest faiths of their audience. The Elizabethans, too, kept drama on a special plane of living,

effectiveness of irony in the theatre—especially of that type of irony which depends upon the audience having knowledge of facts of which the characters in the play are ignorant. This is the very heart of the comic on the stage, and can operate in the largest and smallest aspects of comic material. The irony may be in the creation of the principal character, when it will lie in the difference between the conception of his own personality as held by the hero, and the reality as perceived by the audience. Molière's *Alceste* in *Le Misanthrope* is the classic example of this, but an equally good illustration is Hjalmar Ekdal in *The Wild Duck*. We watch him boasting at home about his behavior at the party, where he has really been a complete outsider; confessing that he has forgotten to bring home anything from it for his little daughter, and offering instead to read the menu and describe to her how the dishes tasted; gibing at his wife's lack of education, when it is only her courage and hard work which keeps their home together; and dreaming rosilily of his photographic invention while he takes every opportunity to neglect the work under his hand. By stroke after stroke of implacable but richly comic observation, we see him greedy, lazy, vain, egocentric, and maudlin with self-pity, while in his own estimation he remains a selfless martyr and misunderstood genius. Were it not that finally his egotism is the direct cause of the death of Hedvig, he would rank as one of the great comically ironic creations in drama.

Or again, the irony may be inherent in the whole conception of the plot, as in *Volpone*, where the fact that we know the Fox to be a healthy and vigorous man, while all his dupes believe him to be at the point of death, is the main-spring of the action. We find the same ironic basis in *As You Like It*, where we are in the secret of Rosalind's disguise, and in *The Country Wife*, where the trick which Mr. Hor-

ner is playing upon society is explained in the first scene just as it is in *Volpone*. Sometimes the irony is only in incidental situations during the course of the play. What makes *The Rivals* so extremely effective on the stage is that it is an almost unbroken series of such positions, contrived with the greatest liveliness: but we have only to think of any of the most famous scenes in comedy to realize that this particular trick is behind them all. The screen scene in *The School for Scandal*; the Malvolio plot in *Twelfth Night*; the trial scene in *The Merchant of Venice*; the tricking of Benedict and Beatrice into confessing their love—all these depend for their comedy upon the characters in the play being in the dark, and the audience being 'in the know.' When Jack Worthing in *The Importance of Being Earnest* enters in ultra-deep mourning and announces the death of his imaginary younger brother, it is our knowledge, and his ignorance, that his friend Algernon has just been impersonating this same young brother, which makes the situation so exquisitely comic, just as it does in *The School for Scandal* when Charles Surface discusses the chances of his uncle's death with the supposed money-lender who is really his uncle in disguise.

§

But though it is not difficult to point out what are the elements in life and in its presentation on the stage which are universally accepted as comic, that is not the same thing as discovering the *nature* of comedy—as isolating some principle which is at work behind every successful comedy. To do this is not a very easy task, for such very different kinds of dramatic experience are classed under the generic term of Comedy. We have got to find a formula which will

include *The Frogs* and *As You Like It* and *Volpone* and *The Way of the World* and *Major Barbara* and *The Cherry Orchard* and *Boy Meets Girl*.

Meredith, in a famous but very mannered and inadequate essay on the subject, declared comedy to be an affair of the intellect. He defined it as the spirit of 'thoughtful laughter,' and regarded it as the result of measuring the reality of things against the yardstick of common-sense. If we take the norm as pure sanity—perfect proportion and equilibrium of human behavior—everything which is proved by that standard to be exaggerated, ill-balanced and disharmonious, becomes the victim of comedy. While it is difficult to be precise about anything so vague as true sanity, it is certainly true that all types of human frailties and self-deceptions are the sport of the comic spirit. Its natural prey, as Meredith said, is human folly, 'known in all its transformations, in every disguise; and it is with the springing delight of hawk over heron, hound after fox, that it gives her chase.'

Meredith, in fact, only allows the name of comedy to intellectual comedy: it becomes the drama which deals with the exposure of an infinite variety of rogues and fools.

But since we use the word Comedy to describe so very much more of what we see in the theatre, it is impossible not to widen the ground of the discussion. It is usual to do this by dividing comedy into the types of Romantic and Realistic, and analyzing these large classes, with Shakespeare at the head of one, and Shaw (say) at the head of the other. But I do not think that is very satisfactory. For one thing the terms have a flavor of belonging to background only, and suggest doublets and hose and hoops and powder on the one hand, and suburban sitting-rooms or proletariat kitchens on the other. And there are other difficulties. In Shakespeare himself, for instance, are Falstaff and his crew

romantic or realistic, and which is Molière's *Don Juan*, or Barrie's *Dear Brutus*? It is perhaps impossible to find any divisions which are entirely watertight, nor indeed is it necessary: the discussion of a dramatic form is not after all a scientific experiment. But I find that the division which seems to me to cover most, and to distinguish most, is the division into comedies which are *critical* in spirit and those which are not. Critical comedy is further divided into *explicit* criticism, which exposes definite follies or abuses to contempt and ridicule, and *implicit*, which is the natural result of revealing human nature as it is. But both these types of comedy, since they are founded on fact, are under an obligation to provide problems, characters and solutions which shall satisfy our sense of the reality of what they are criticizing. On the other side are all those comedies which are definitely an escape from reality, and intend to be so. They are irresponsible, whereas critical comedies are responsible. It is true, of course, that a bad critical comedy, which has not observed its obligations towards human truth, and fobs us off with unlikely conversions, inadequate motives and sentimental evasions, automatically becomes irresponsible, but it does so without intent, and is quite different from the truly irresponsible comedy, which is not answerable to the terms of the probable, since they do not operate in its world.

§

There are two great writers of direct satiric comedy in English: Ben Jonson and Bernard Shaw. There would no doubt have been another in Henry Fielding, had not the Government in 1737 hastily passed the Licensing Act to put an end to his inconvenient activities. At no time in England,

Country Wife as the story of 'a licentious intrigue between an impudent London rake and the idiot wife of a country squire,' and continues: 'We will not go into details. In truth Wycherley's indecency is protected against the critics as a skunk is protected against the hunters. It is safe because it is too filthy to handle and too noisome to approach.' What Macaulay would say to the public of London and New York both acclaiming the play in the same theatrical season it is hard to imagine. But the morals of Restoration comedy have always been a matter of discussion and of censure, and it is not at all surprising that they should be, for no English drama has ever been so frank. Dr. Johnson said of Congreve that the ultimate effect of his plays was 'to represent pleasure in alliance with vice, and to relax those obligations by which life ought to be regulated.' Meredith turns from it in horror—'our so-called Comedy of Manners, or Comedy of the Manners of the South Sea Islanders under city veneer; and as to comic idea, vacuous as the mask without the face behind it.' Nor has any defense ever been very successful. When Jeremy Collier attacked the contemporary stage in 1699, the dramatists themselves put up a very poor fight. Vanbrugh urged that the business of comedy is to show people what they should do by representing them on the stage doing what they should *not* do—which is about as feeble an argument as that used recently in London about *The Country Wife* that the actor and actress who played Horner and Mrs. Pinchwife were obviously such delightful people in themselves that it robbed the play of all offense! Lamb made the most famous apologia when he claimed boldly,

I feel the better always for the perusal of one of Congreve's—nay, why should I not add even of Wycherley's—comedies. I am the gayer at least for it; and I could never connect those

sports of a witty fancy in any shape with any result to be drawn from them to imitation in real life. They are a world of themselves almost as much as fairyland.

But this defense, though it has much truth in it, can hardly stand as an adequate reply to the direct attack on the subject matter of the plays. There is no question that the Restoration audience regarded the plays as as much a reflection of their own society as we regard those of Somerset Maugham, Noel Coward or S. N. Behrman as a reflection of ours. But just as these comedy writers of our own day present us with a critical and satiric view of our own society, so did the Restoration playwrights criticize and satirize theirs. We do not say our stage is immoral because Noel Coward shows us a young man who takes drugs, or because Maugham shows us a stupid society hostess, or because Behrman draws a puritanical provincial politician. In just the same way the Restoration wits are exposing the vices and follies of their Fainalls and Witwounds, their Pinchwifes and Sparkishes, their Lady Wishforts and Lady Fidgets, and all their talk of 'honor' and 'quality,' to the ridicule and contempt of their audiences. We may surely take it as certain that then, as now, it was not really a compliment to the average middle-aged gentlewoman to tell her that she is suspected of being with child by a young admirer; that the average fashionable young man did not hire women of the town to call for him at a chocolate house in order to get a reputation of being pestered by the ladies; that the average pair of friends did not criticize each other to their acquaintance with viperish malice; and that the average of elderly ladies did not scream at their maids for the paintbox, and solace themselves with swigs of cherry-brandy while they were waiting for it.

To make any sort of valid moral judgment on this world,

we must find the 'norm' from which the dramatists regard their society, and base a criticism on that. What standard of manners do they regard as the embodiment of good feeling and good sense, as the true sanity which comedy upholds? Now Wycherley clearly, I think, regards Horner and Alithea as such a norm, and Congreve, Mirabell and Millamant: it is their creed of behavior, therefore, which, if we are concerned about their morals, is the standard to be judged.

I do not think there is any difference at all between the standards of Alithea and Millamant and those of Rosalind and Beatrice. Just like Shakespeare's witty heroines, they know all there is to be known about men and women, and joke about it with the utmost freedom, while remaining fresh and charming girls without any personal experience of sex. The heroes, however, cannot be said to emerge as very squeamish people. Mr. Horner regards the social code as his natural enemy, and takes it that all's fair in his contest with it. Moreover, though he is witty and good-natured, he cannot be said to have a very fastidious taste in women. Quantity, not quality, is his motto. 'For ceremony in love and eating is as ridiculous as in fighting: falling on briskly is all should be done on these occasions.' Mirabell is a far more cultivated man of the world. He is clear-sighted both about himself and about others, and he is a man of real intelligence. He cannot bear a shoddy wit like Witwoud, or a tasteless one like Petulant. It is true that when his former mistress asks him why he forced her into marriage with Fainall, he is quite callous and candid in his reply:

Why do we daily commit disagreeable and dangerous actions? to save that idol, reputation. If the familiarities of our loves had produced that consequence of which you were apprehensive, where could you have fixed a father's name with credit, but on a husband?

But in spite of this, we find he has taken practical steps to protect her money from falling into Fainall's hands, and though he makes no pretense to be chaste, he is an epicure: 'methinks wit is more necessary than beauty; and I think no young woman ugly that has it, and no handsome one agreeable without it.'

The world of the Restoration drama is a world without pretenses. It is a world in which sexual intrigue, fortune-hunting, gambling and drinking are the chief occupations, as they inevitably are in any idle and semi-civilized section of any society. Since it is also a world in which the accepted code of propriety for women is extremely strict, it is riddled with hypocrisy, trickery and shifts to save the bubble of female reputation. Lady Wishfort, for example, is willing to sacrifice her entire fortune in order to save her daughter from the scandal of a divorce. But it is difficult to see wherein this world differs from the fashionable 'sets' of our own day, except in the difference of its moral standards for men and for women, and in its ignorance of the methods of birth-control.

As for the comedy based on this society, it is the most outspoken comedy in the English tongue. It does not pretend that love always lasts, or that it is the same thing as lust, or that men and women do not marry for money, or that aging women do not cling to youth, or that husbands and wives never deceive one another, or that jokes and innuendoes about sex are not amusing. It is as full of sound, shrewd, cool knowledge of life as the Proverbs.

Say what you will, 'tis better to be left, than never to have been loved.

A woman who is not a fool, can have but one reason for associating with a man who is one.

Next to the pleasure of making a new mistress is that of

being rid of an old one, and of all old debts love, when it comes to be so, is paid the most unwillingly.

Wildness in a man is as desirable a quality as in a duck or a rabbit: a tame man! foh!

But it is not its frankness and sophistication which makes this comedy live, refreshing though it is. It is its style. Its field is narrow, its feeling superficial, its tone flippant, its plots thin, its characters often crude. Its women especially have very seldom any of the gentle brilliance and grace of Molière's. But at its best its language is so energetic, so lively, so witty, that we forget everything else in our enjoyment of a world so full of vivacity and elegance. Every page of Congreve, as Hazlitt says, is 'a new triumph over dullness,' and we are indeed the gayer—and the better—for reading and hearing it.

§

The Way of the World was presented in 1700, and was a failure. Whether it was the lack of action and situation in the play, or whether already the reaction against the heartless gaiety of the comedy of wit had set in, we do not know, but Congreve vowed he would write no more for the stage, and kept his word. A new age dawned bleakly for the drama.

Dulness o'er all possess'd her ancient right,
Daughter of Chaos and eternal Night:
Laborious, heavy, busy, bold and blind,
She rul'd, in native Anarchy, the mind.¹

Flashes of witty comedy still break through every now and then up to the time of Goldsmith and Sheridan, but a

¹ *The Dunciad*.

gradual softening of the brain had set in. Goldsmith writes in 1771, in his dedication of *She Stoops to Conquer*, that 'the undertaking a comedy not merely sentimental was very dangerous,' and the way in which Marlow, the hero of the play, speaks to the supposed 'poor relation,' who is really Kate Hardcastle, show what seventy years of sentiment had already done.

Excuse me, my lovely girl, you are the only part of the family I leave with reluctance. But, to be plain with you, the difference in our birth, fortune and education make an honourable connection impossible, and I can never harbour the thought of seducing simplicity that trusted my honour.

The comedies of Sheridan, brilliant though they are in wit, have also this slight misting of sentimentality. The clear dry light of Molière and Congreve has been lost. A new convention of comedic stage behavior has crept in, which makes it peculiarly suitable for performances in girls' schools. Husbands and wives may be temporarily at cross-purposes, but it will all come right in the end; temptations to stray from virtuous paths may assail young women, and may *almost* succeed, but we may be sure they will not quite do so; young men may be wasters and tipplers, but they always have it in their power to repent and reform; lovers may be insanely jealous, but marriage to a good woman will put all to rights; the villain may flourish even up to the fifth act, but he will be safely unmasked then. It is often all very delightful, but it is irresponsible. Sheridan carries it off excellently. He is a master of comic situation and of incisive dialogue, and much of the old comedy of manners still lingers. Too much for some of his earnest-minded contemporaries, indeed, and we find a correspondent to *The Gentleman's Magazine* for February, 1778, declaring that *The School for Scandal* is 'at least as defective in morality as

abundant in wit; and more dangerous to the manners of society, than it can possibly tend to promote its pleasures.' The writer points out that the sight of gossiping women on the stage will put ideas into the heads of the young women in the audience, and that we are expected to sympathize with Charles Surface who is clearly shown as being generous before he is just.

Indeed, the spirit of general squeamishness which we are accustomed to call 'early Victorian' was not early Victorian at all, it was late Georgian. We can see it in the plays of Richard Cumberland (whom the correspondent in *The Gentleman's Magazine* much prefers to Sheridan). In *The West Indian* a young man apologizes to the heroine for suspecting her of being the mistress, when she was in fact the sister, of another man. Penitently he pleads: 'What reparation can I make to you and to virtue?' and she replies:

To me there is nothing due, nor anything demanded of you but your more favorable opinion for the future, if you should chance to think of me: Upon the part of virtue I'm not empowered to speak, but if hereafter, as you range thro' life you shou'd surprize her in the person of some wretched female, poor as myself and not so well protected, enforce not your advantage, compleat not your licentious triumph, but raise her, rescue her from shame and sorrow, and reconcile her to herself again.

§

This sort of thing lasted for more than a hundred years. Then critical comedy was born again in the slightly Aristophanic comic operas of Gilbert and Sullivan, in the wit of Oscar Wilde, and in the social dramas of Pinero and Henry Arthur Jones. It became more fully adult in the 'problem' plays and comedies of manners of Granville Barker, Stan-

ley Houghton, and St. John Hankin, and in the great satiric comedies of Bernard Shaw.

The other powerful influence upon our own age has been Chekov. *The Cherry Orchard* created a new type of social comedy. The plot is almost entirely non-existent, and the emphasis shifts to the elements of grouping, lighting and tone. The irony implicit in character creation and contrast takes the place of the old irony of situation. When the completely irresponsible Gaev dismisses Lopahin's idea of selling the cherry orchard so that it shall both pay their debts and develop a new prosperous community, as 'rot,' and is found a few moments later weeping over the old bookcase, and murmuring, 'thy silent call to fruitful labour has never flagged in a hundred years, maintaining in the generations of man, courage and faith in a brighter future and fostering in us ideals of good and social consciousness . . .' it is a new type of comic irony. The criticism is there, but it is never underlined or made explicit. We may see an Irish version of it in *The Moon in the Yellow River*, by Denis Johnston, where, apart from the sheer excellence of the dialogue, the artistry is in the creation of a group of characters, who simply move and talk with a sense of spontaneous and varying mood, but who weave themselves into a total dramatic pattern whose critical meaning is simply in itself without explicit interpretation.

§

Although the standard of judgment may vary in critical comedy from the moral arrogance of Jonson and the flinty intellectual logic of Shaw, to the sophisticated worldly opportunism of the Restoration or the elusive satire of Chekov, this kind of comedy is different in essence from the kind

which is uncritical and arbitrary in its use of its material. Critical comedy may be urbane or cynical, gentle or malicious, but in event, character and conclusion, it is linked to a recognizable social order, and does not leave it. In this it differs not in degree but in kind from the world of Romance and of Farce. For the world of farce is as much an escape from reality as the world of romance. It depends on a rush of surprises and shifts and fantasies which suspend all ordinary rules of behavior, though they possess an insane logic of their own. Events and characters are immersed in an atmosphere where questions of motive, consistency, or unity of anything except foolery do not exist.

And the world of romantic comedy is the same. It is emotionally irresponsible. It has not the seriousness of tragedy, and it lacks the precision of true comedy. It may be very jolly, like Dekker's *Shoemaker's Holiday*, for instance. Here, though the story is romantic, the setting is realistic—or what we now think of as the real 'merrie England' of Queen Elizabeth's day. Simon Eyre, the racy, bluff, hearty shoemaker, and his equally hearty wife, their apprentices and workmen, the bustling boisterous life of the streets, the whole mood of good humor, good feeling and good sense, with its simple humor and simple pathos and romantic love affair between the Lord Mayor's daughter and the young nobleman who disguises himself as a workman, and its happy conclusion, are an embodiment of all that is best in the romantic convention. But it is not a convention we can stand very much of. It suffers almost always from the extreme difficulty of making virtuous and picturesque heroines interesting, and degenerates all too easily into the 'favour and prettiness' of Beaumont and Fletcher, and the whimsicalities of Barrie.

Shakespeare's comedy cannot be fitted neatly into any class we have yet discussed. His London is the London of Jonson, but he has little interest in the discomfiture of rogues and fools, nor did he ever find pleasure or profit in 'exposing' anything or anybody. Parolles is given another chance—'Though you are a fool and a knave, you shall eat: go to, follow,' says Lafeu tolerantly, and even Angelo is allowed to redeem himself. Shakespeare's mockery never has any malice, and Jonson's dramatic hardness of heart is unknown to him. If we are to take the name as proof, his standard of pure sanity is Touchstone, who blends his laughter at hypocrisy and folly with the most touching loyalty to the two girls, and who ends by marrying the most simple of country wenches. His greatest comic character is simply a huge mass of enjoyment—of enjoyment of the world, and enjoyment of the pleasure he affords to other people, and enjoyment of his own jokes about himself.

And although the world his characters inhabit has often little in common with the real world, the characters themselves are always completely human. Romantic heroines chaff each other like any couple of girl friends.

Rosalind. Never talk to me; I will weep.

Celia. Do, I prithee, but yet have the grace to consider that tears do not become a man.

Rosalind. But have I not cause to weep?

Celia. As good cause as one would desire; therefore weep.

Rosalind. His very hair is of the dissembling colour.

Celia. Something browner than Judas's: marry, his kisses are Judas's own children.

Rosalind. I' faith, his hair is of a good colour.

Celia. An excellent colour: your chestnut was ever the only colour.

Rosalind. And his kissing is as full of sanctity as the touch of holy bread.

Celia. He hath bought a pair of cast lips of Diana: a nun of

winter's sisterhood kisses not more religiously; the very ice of chastity is in them.

Rosalind. But why did he swear he would come this morning, and comes not?

And it is not only the principal characters who have this living idiom. Even Wart and Feeble, Mouldy and Bullcalf are real men; and Silence and Shallow, whether wagging their heads together over youth and death and the value of a score of good ewes, or merrily and tipsily caroling comic songs over the pippins and caraways in the orchard, are alive and human in every quavering tone of their feeble old voices. Imagine what Wycherley, for instance, would have made of that pair.

Shakespeare's comic scheme, if we can call it anything so serious, is always the restoration to happiness of innocent victims of injustice or misfortune. It operates in a world which is subject to no laws except its own, and where all standards of realism have been cheerfully abandoned. The plays are full of the utmost absurdity of situation, and are huddled up anyhow at the end to provide a happy time for all. Pepys described *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as 'the most insipid, ridiculous play that ever I saw in my life,' and if purely rational standards are applied to Shakespearean comedy, that is what it inevitably appears. It is full of the grossest outrages on common-sense. We have got to accept that neither Orlando nor her father recognize Rosalind in her boy's dress; that Viola and Sebastian would be wearing identical clothes after several months' separation during which Viola has disguised herself as a boy; and, in the emotional sphere, that Imogen can be happy with a contemptible cur like Posthumous, and Helena with one like Bertram. Yet once we have accepted this world of illusion it becomes as rich and richer than the world of responsible comedy. Its

world is conceived in poetry—it is a world of color, and image, and rhythm—brave with youth and folly and romantic love and the English countryside in fine weather; full of a warm delight in oddities of character of all sorts and sizes, and full of a rich sense of fun and whole-hearted fooling of every imaginable kind. And finally, in the last comedies, Shakespeare allowed real human evil and suffering to enter this world without wrecking it. The jealousy of Leontes, the disloyalty of Posthumous, the cruel pain of Hermione and Imogen are quite different in quality from the misfortunes and misdoings of the earlier plays, yet they are subdued and reconciled to the conclusions of comedy, and we are satisfied that they should be.

§

We come back again to the question—What, then, is the nature of comedy? Has this discussion of some of its types and elements brought us nearer any possible generalizations about that elusive matter? For it is elusive. Comedy includes so much greater a variety of dramatic experience than tragedy. What can there be in common between *Volpone* and *A Kiss for Cinderella*, between *The Country Wife* and *The Doctor's Dilemma*?

Perhaps the better line of approach to the problem is to ask what is the fundamental difference in nature between all these plays, and plays such as *Othello* and *Uncle Vanya* and *Ghosts* and *The Ascent of F6*?

The difference can obviously have nothing to do with the actual subject matter of the plays. A jealous husband is the cause of tragedy in *Othello* and of comedy in *The Country Wife*; and the hero of *The Country Wife* makes the springs of the whole comic action out of the disease which is the

cause of the tragedy in *Ghosts*. Cleopatra is a figure in a tragedy to Shakespeare and in a comedy to Shaw. Nor is it possible to say that comedy appeals to the intellect and tragedy to the emotions, for obviously the main appeal of Shakespeare's comedies is emotional; and humor, wit and sentiment are frequently found together elsewhere. Nor can we say that the distinction is between plays which end with the death of the principal character, and those which do not; for no one would call *Uncle Vanya* a comedy, though everyone is alive at the conclusion, and no one would call *The Doctor's Dilemma* a tragedy, although the hero dies in the third act. And if we say that the difference is between a story of human happiness and human unhappiness, we must say that *Volpone* or *The Cherry Orchard* are stories of human happiness, which is absurd.

Yet everyone *does* agree that there is some similarity between the plays of the first group, and between those of the second, and a dissimilarity between the two groups. Since, therefore, it has nothing to do with the subject matter, plot construction, or 'tone,' it must be something to do with an effect created in the mind of the reader or audience. And here, I think, we do find a valid distinction. The essence of comedy is found to lie in one kind of total response, and the essence of tragedy in another kind of total response. And the most pertinent question to ask, therefore, is, What scale of emotional and intellectual values prevail at the end of the play, and are therefore impressed upon the consciousness of the reader or spectator?

The answer is that in comedy temporal values prevail, and in tragedy eternal. *Comedy is always rooted in the social order*. It deals with the relationship of individuals to society, and of society to individuals. The individuals may criticize society as Shaw does in *Major Barbara*, or society

may criticize the individuals, as it does implicitly in *The Cherry Orchard*. Comedy may concern itself only with the immediate field of society revealed in the play, as the comedy of Jonson or Congreve or Shaw does; or it may expand into the contemplation of human nature in general as Shakespeare does; but its final standards are, I think, always *social*, whether its spirit is critical or uncritical, responsible or irresponsible, and its background realist or romantic. Even in *Man and Superman*, where the superb first act shows Tanner making mincemeat of the shams and inconsistencies of the conventional social creed, the end of the play finds him a victim to the life-force which drags him back into the general social pattern of behavior. Comedy may, and frequently does, challenge the workings of a particular social order, as a man may quarrel with the organization or personnel of his own home, but its solutions are nevertheless within the limits of a social order. Its motto is 'Reason can find a way.' The conclusions of comedy imply the acceptance of the terms on which human life has got to be lived. Thus Dobelle, at the end of *The Moon in the Yellow River*, in spite of the spectacle of the senseless mess human irresponsibility and pure chance have made of things during the action of the play, begins, as it were, a new life on the same terms, just as Mrs. Mulpeter's newborn baby over the way is doing.

Comedy does not move into the realm of abstract justice, but anchors itself in this world with its imperfect but easier emotional and ethical judgments. It acquiesces quite happily in the death of Louis Dubedat in *The Doctor's Dilemma*, seeing the gain to society in it as far greater than the loss to art, and the audience is quite satisfied to let the episode be a stroke of satiric comedy at the expense of the medical profession. But the judgments of comedy can

nevertheless be very cruel, as we can see in the matter of the rejection of Falstaff. That episode, however revolting to the sympathetic spectator, is essential if the social norm is to be upheld by Henry. He is no longer a private person, he is the head of the social order of the community, and he has the whole weight of that responsibility behind what sounds like priggish self-complacency. By the inexorable standards of society, Falstaff is a besotted, disgusting and dishonest old wretch who must drop out of personal relationship with a hero-king.

At the end of *Awake and Sing*, Ralph Berger cries rebelliously about the terms on which he is expected to live his life, 'It's wrong. It doesn't make sense,' and it is of the essence of comedy that life within its limits *does* 'make sense' at the conclusion of the play. Whether its effect is as simple as *Boy Meets Girl*, or as complex as *The Tempest*, it always leaves this impression of a solvent and determining quality working upon our emotional and intellectual responses. This feeling is probably a complex one. It is partly an ethical satisfaction in a conclusion we can comfortably accept as valid; it is partly the sense of release from the bonds of the actual, of the conventional, of the expected which laughter always gives (and there is generally incidental laughter even in a serious comedy); and it is partly the pleasures of the gratification of wish-fulfillment. If we are ourselves rational and sympathetic, we like to watch the cheats and fools and tricksters get their deserts, and to see a happy issue to the troubles of the pleasant and deserving. The conclusion satisfies both our humanity and our consciousness of communal good sense and good feeling: it leaves us with a coherent and stable attitude to life: in it life is made to appear intelligible and finite.

If it does not leave us in this mood, if it has stirred emo-

tions and has not harmonized them into a satisfying final chord, it has failed as comedy. *The Merchant of Venice*, for example, fails in this way because of our modern attitude to Shylock: so does *Much Ado About Nothing* because of the too-poignant suffering of Hero, and *Measure for Measure* because the light-hearted match-making at the conclusion is too facile for the weight of emotional distress in the body of the play. We are left rebellious, we do not acquiesce in the final judgments: they jar on our sense of what is right and fitting. There is something in the response which forbids that kind of emotional solution.

That something is the element of tragedy, which has not been subdued, as Shakespeare managed to subdue it in his later romances, to the conclusions of comedy, and which remains, therefore, an unassimilated element. The scheme of temporal values will not fit the facts. And this is the great difference between the world of tragedy and the world of comedy—that in tragedy we are forced to throw overboard the attitude by which we can find life intelligible. We have got to accept it as unintelligible, and to find a harmony, if a harmony can be found, in the discovery of values other than those of this world.

TRAGEDY

IT IS, PERHAPS, BECAUSE ALL LOVERS of the drama feel that great tragedy is the widest and deepest and most intense of their dramatic experiences that so much has been written about it. The subject is riddled with critical theory, and with tenets held and argued about with the most dogmatic insistence. We cannot escape from Lessing, from Hegel, from Schlegel, from Nietzsche, from Freytag, from Bradley. But above all, we cannot escape from Aristotle—though he himself might well have agreed with Dryden, who remarked with admirable good sense:

It is not enough that Aristotle has said so, for Aristotle drew his models of tragedy from Sophocles and Euripides, and if he had seen ours, might have changed his mind.

At any rate he would have widened the basis on which he judged, and it is surely better to use Aristotle as a useful test to our own experience, than as an unerring touchstone whose criterion no further experience can impair.

But Aristotle's definition of what constitutes a tragic drama is a more comprehensive one than that which has since been accepted. From medieval days onward, it has commonly been taken that a tragedy must end in death. As Chaucer's monk said,

Tragedie is to seyn a certayn storie,
As olde bokes maken us memorie,
Of him that stood in greet prosperitee
And is y-fallen out of heigh degree
Into miserie, and endeth wretchedly.

But if the hero or heroine must die at the end of a tragedy, we are forced to class *Uncle Vanya* and *The Three Sisters*, *Ghosts*, *Justice*, *The Father*, as well as many of the classical tragedies as comedies, which is absurd. Aristotle said that a tragedy is a play whose action is 'serious and complete,' which is a good working definition after all. There can be no dramatic absolute in tragedy. And if we continue to ignore theory, and to judge only by our own experience of actual drama, we shall find that there is only one thing which is common to every tragedy, and that is that it is the presentation, in dramatic terms, of some aspect of human suffering.

The tragic dramatist sees Man, as every intelligent and sensitive person sees him, compassed about by mystery and misfortune, conquered by fate, the sport of glands or coincidence, struggling with character and environment, the perpetual victim of cruelty, injustice and pain. He sees Life as a prison, to whose bars man clings, calling out for release; as that wheel of fire on which Lear felt himself to be bound, his own tears scalding like molten lead; as a slave 'bound face to face with Death, till death'; as a fierce dispute 'betwixt damnation and impassioned clay'; as a mighty hostile force to be met with aspiration or ambition, with challenge or with cunning, with understanding or with defiance, with acquiescence, or with mere endurance. He may see this vision of the world's suffering symbolized in an historical myth of crime, revenge and final reconciliation, the story of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra and Orestes,

or in the lives and deaths of famous figures of history, Joan of Arc, or Antony and Cleopatra, or Thomas à Becket; or in the tale of what happened to a pigheaded old man dividing up his kingdom according to the love for him professed by his three daughters; or in a group of thwarted pitiful men and women, crying with Uncle Vanya 'I have not lived, I have not lived!'; or in the person of a cold egotist like Hedda, poisoning the lives of better and simpler folk; or in the sacrifice of a poor, honest charwoman, crushed to ruin by the monster of social injustice.

§

Any critical observation of human life inevitably provokes the sense of irony. In the theatre, if this observation is directed towards human folly and weakness, and can express and disperse itself through the medium of laughter, the result is the irony of comedy. If it is directed towards human suffering and evil, it creates the sense of tragic irony, the profoundest element in the impact of any serious play. In any dramatic treatment of the conflict and complications which beset the interaction of character and circumstance in human life, we are confronted by the spectacle of the innate perversity of fate, and of human personality and human action, by the eternal incongruity of things, by the discrepancy between reality and men's illusion, between hope and achievement, between conception and conclusion: by the whole dilemma of man's position in the universe—the fact that he is vividly aware of values which he instinctively recognizes to be vital to him, while he continues to be constantly thwarted in his efforts to live by these values in either his inner or his outer life.

We have already spoken of a particular type of irony,

known as dramatic irony, whose effects are gained by the audience being aware of things of which the actors on the stage are ignorant. As a schoolboy said in an essay I once corrected: 'It is when somebody says something which has a totally different meaning, and sometimes it is sarcasm too, as when Duncan says what a nice home Macbeth has.' It is the irony of Othello's welcome to Desdemona when he lands at Cyprus.

O my soul's joy!

If after every tempest come such calms,
May the winds blow till they have waken'd death!
And let the labouring bark climb hills of seas
Olympus-high, and duck again as low
As hell's from heaven! If it were now to die,
'Twere now to be most happy; for I fear,
My soul hath her content so absolute
That not another comfort like to this
Succeeds in unknown fate.

But though dramatic irony is immensely effective in the theatre, the larger aspects of irony are much deeper and more pervasive. They color the whole conception of tragic experience, and in the finest tragedies they are implicit everywhere in the plotting of the action and the creation of the character. It is not too much to say that it is upon the ironic *pressure* which is felt in a tragic play that its greatness depends. In all tragedy, irony is a kind of ferment, a yeast which works through it all, but in great tragedy it is an ever-tightening tension which creates that mounting, penetrating excitement of mind and spirit and senses which is the ecstasy of the theatre.

There are three facets from which irony can be reflected: circumstance, character and coincidence. Aristotle divided tragedies into those which have *peripateia* and those which

have not, and that continues to be a very real distinction. *Peripateia* means the reversing of an original intention by the conclusion to which it actually works out; and one of the illustrations which Aristotle gives is that the messenger comes to Oedipus to cheer him and free him from the fear of marrying his mother, but by revealing who Oedipus is, he produces exactly the opposite result. Mrs. Alving in *Ghosts* crushes her love for Pastor Manders and stays with her husband, thinking she is serving a higher purpose than her own desires, and the result is that her son inherits his father's disease: Macbeth obeys the promptings of the witches and the counsels of his wife, foreseeing 'the sweet fruition of an earthly crown,' and finds life turns to a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing; Abbie Putnam in O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms* sets out to seduce Eben with the idea of advantage to herself, and finds it leads to the murder of her child and the ruin of herself and the man she loves. *Peripateia* is followed by *anagnorisis*, which is the discovery by the hero of the tragic error into which he has fallen—the culminating moment when the irony is revealed, and he understands all that has gone before: the moment when Oswald reveals to Mrs. Alving what has happened to him, when Orestes sees the Furies, when Othello cries out in his agony 'O fool! fool! fool!'

It is easy to see how tragic plots which involve this type of dramatic movement are far more effective than those which do not. The spectacle of the simple irony of unmerited suffering coming upon those who have done nothing whatever to deserve it, though it may be infinitely moving, cannot possibly have the excitement of a *peripateia*. The fate of Oedipus, for instance, if it had not been complicated by all the superb dramatic jugglery by which his story is gradually revealed, would have been robbed of all

its thrill. It would have been in the same class of tragic experience as *The Trojan Women* or *The Silver Box*, where the victims of disaster are perfectly blameless characters, who are simply 'Fortune's fools,' where the appeal is solely to pity, and the reaction of the audience solely one of impotent rebellion against the ironical and inescapable facts of human injustice. But the more subtle effects of the irony of circumstance are so much more powerful than the mere blows of Fate because they are inextricably involved with the irony of character.

We are not the first
Who with best meaning have incurred the worst.

says Cordelia, and it is this Aristotelian *hamartia*, the tragic error or flaw by which the hero or heroine is caught up into the ironical situation, which is the mainspring of a great tragedy. For the great tragic hero, says Aristotle, is someone not absolutely good and wise, and the net of disaster in which he becomes ensnared, and finally perishes, is woven in part by himself, however innocently he may have done it.

It is a comment on the innate rationalism of the human mind—or perhaps it is only a comment on the nature of dramatic art—that there is a far deeper satisfaction in a play which contains this more or less definite pattern of human action working out its own consequences (however unexpected and painful they may be), than in a course of action which uses human figures as puppets of circumstances created by a malign fate. Job, for instance, the mere pitiful and passive victim of a grandiloquent and senseless bully, can never be a dramatic character. Antigone, too, is a purely 'good' character, but she differs from Job in that she deliberately chose the path which led to her own fate: she is an

illustration of the saying that 'character is destiny.' How far this saying is true of the tragic hero and heroine in general is an interesting subject for discussion. Ibsen is the finest example of its application. Relentless psychological truth, the remorseless interplay of cause and effect in human destiny, is the whole motive power in Ibsen's plays. His protagonists, blindly or deliberately following the promptings of their own natures, mold their own ultimate ruin, dragging others down with them in a chaos of ironic injustice. Shakespeare, however, never relies entirely on the 'tragic flaw' to bring his heroes to ruin: the irony of coincidence, sheer bad luck, always has a hand in the action. Hamlet's character is the most important thing in *Hamlet*, but it has nothing to do with its being Polonius and not the King behind the arras; nor are the dropping of Desdemona's handkerchief, or the fact that the reprieve reaches Cordelia's prison too late, anything but very unfortunate accidents.

But in spite of these unlucky incidents, we do feel that, consciously or unconsciously, the seeds of the tragedy lie in the personality of the chief character. The degree to which he is responsible for his own ruin varies in different plays. Obviously Macbeth is more responsible than Hamlet, Antony than Brutus, Lear than St. Joan, Rebecca West than Mrs. Alving. The degree of moral guilt involved also varies enormously. Orestes and Macbeth are both murderers, yet Orestes is only a murderer in the sense that Hamlet is one: he *had* to avenge his father. Antigone and Brutus also act from the highest conviction of duty; Othello did naught in hate, but all in honor; Lear made a hasty judgment and let his temper run away with him. In fact, the tragic error is far more often a mistake, some false step taken blindly, than a deliberate offense, or even a symptom of something 'false within.'

§

Although it is difficult to discuss the sense of irony which is behind all tragic drama without generalizing about the spectacle of human evil and suffering and the problem of human character, it is not the subject matter of tragedy which is the real interest of its study, but the observation of how the minds of individual dramatists react to that common subject matter, and the innumerable ways in which they each create their own responses to it. 'All art is founded upon personal vision, and the greater the art, the more personal the vision.'¹ There must be a new philosophy behind a new drama, says Shaw.

What is the use of writing plays or painting frescoes, if you have nothing more to say or shew than was said and shewn by Shakespeare, Michael Angelo and Raphael. . . . The playgoer may reasonably ask to have historical events and persons presented to him in the light of his own time, even though Homer and Shakespeare have already shewn them in the light of their time.²

Every fresh artist sees his material freshly, but although his vision must be in a sense unique, there are certain large ways of seeing life seriously which tend to divide dramatists into certain fairly clearly-defined groups. 'The artist-philosophers are the only sort of artists I take quite seriously,' says Shaw, and he speaks for all those who feel that the dramatist should offer some code of cosmic values behind the spectacle of this brutish and blackguardly world.

When anyone declares that art should not be didactic, all the people who have nothing to teach, and all the people who don't want to learn agree with him emphatically.

¹ W. B. Yeats, *Plays and Controversies*.

² *Three Plays for Puritans*.

Santayana agrees with Shaw.

To attempt to abstract a so-called aesthetic interest from all other interests, and a so-called work of art from whatever work ministers, in one way or another, to all human good, is to make the aesthetic sphere contemptible. . . . When creative genius neglects to ally itself in this way to some public interest it hardly gives birth to works of wide or perennial interest. Imagination needs a soil in history, tradition or human institutions—else its random growths are not significant enough, and, like trivial melodies, go immediately out of fashion.¹

Reading this, the mind of the reader flies at once to the Greeks, and indeed, there has never been an art which answers to these demands as Greek tragedy does. But it is difficult for the modern imagination, even with the best will in the world, to respond wholeheartedly to Greek tragedy. Most of us have to approach the work of the dramatists through translations, which in itself is an immense stumbling block to appreciation: in addition, we must remember constantly the physical conditions of the theatre for which the plays were written, and lastly we must recapture their reality. What a task! We can love the Greek spirit—that is not difficult. How perfect those ideals sound as we say them: freedom of thought, love of virtue and knowledge, worship of beauty in mind and body and spirit! But when we meet the plays themselves, they are so different. All that complicated mythology and miraculous history; all those oracles and sphinxes, prophets and immortals; all the peculiar taboos and fetishes; all the references to local patriotism, custom and faiths! It is all so far removed from any standards with which we are familiar; they appeal so continually to collective loyalties and beliefs to which we

¹ *Obiter Scripta*.

cannot now respond. We can do what Santayana says we must *not* do, we can abstract a 'so-called aesthetic interest' and find great interest in seeing how dramatic artists of three thousand years ago created stage plays, but although much of their material is the eternal stuff of drama in every age, much of it is inevitably now meaningless and empty.

To the modern, brought up in the atmosphere of naturalistic drama, and of the study of individual psychology, Aeschylus appears dimly remote and inhuman. We are accustomed to a play which is the representation of a particular piece of human experience, acted by characters with human emotions proper to that experience. To Aeschylus, such a conception would have been the depths of triviality. Drama to him means a ritual ceremony, during which a story is enacted from which he can reflect an interpretation of the moral order of the cosmos. He is not interested in human emotions except in so far as they illustrate the workings of abstract principles: except in so far as they illustrate the individual as a part of an organic moral structure. It sounds inhuman enough, but although Aeschylus was absorbed in Man rather than in men, he makes the supreme value in his universe rest upon the quality of human action. We are accustomed nowadays to be scientific (or what we think is scientific) about human personality. We trace effects to a variety of causes—to economic conditions, to heredity, to environment, to ductless glands, to the nervous system, to society, to opportunity, to the operation of natural laws, and so on: and we seek cures for individual and social ills along the same lines of investigation. To Aeschylus there was only one spring of responsibility—human sin. He is passionately interested in the metaphysic of evil, but he never thinks of denying the responsibility of the sinner, or of shifting the center of gravity of the cosmic design from

the integrity of the human spirit to the operations of a mechanistic universe. Human sin breaks the laws of being, it disintegrates the cosmic harmony; order is shattered and 'Chaos is come again.' Sin begets sin, and the innocent suffer with the guilty, but the unconquerable mind of man, even though it is responsible, is never weak. It is superb in its defiance of suffering. 'For me, I glory!' declares Clytemnestra when she has killed Agamemnon. 'Courage!' says Antigone, knowing her heath is certain, 'the power will be mine and the means to act,' while Prometheus hurls his magnificent defiance at Zeus from the midst of his mortal agony. In the *Eumenides*, Aeschylus showed justice re-establishing the moral order, and harmony restored. The lost conclusion of the *Prometheus* no doubt illustrates it too. Aeschylus believed in a just God, but it is a God 'whose law it is that he who learns must suffer.'

The most distinguished poet of the present day believes also in that God and that law, and *Murder in the Cathedral* turns our minds back to the Greeks not only in certain aspects of its outward form, but by its character as ritual drama, and by the firm structure of abstract thought behind its course of events—although that thought is purely Christian and coldly theological, without any of the splendid warmth of pagan vitality. Eliot sees temporal power, the effort to build a good world, 'to keep order, as the world knows order,' as only one remove above the life of 'wit, wine and wisdom.' Thomas puts behind him, as his creator has, all those earthly and human matters

that with myself I too much discuss
Too much explain,

and to his friends who seek to keep his enemies out, he cries his final submission.

Unbar the door! . . .
I give my life
To the Law of God above the Law of Man.

§

With Sophocles we feel nearer the modern world, because his central thought has nothing to do with sin and punishment and reconciliation, but is simply the fact of the instability of human fortune. 'Count no man happy until he be dead' is the burden of his message, though he, too, communicates that lofty Greek conception—that it is axiomatic that man should wish to live as noble and virtuous a life as possible. He will naturally wish to do this, and for the rest, he must accept his fate,

Joy and grief
the wheels of time
roll round to all,
even as the circling pathways of the stars.

He is not an artist-philosopher, but a pure artist, a dramatist welding action and character together in exquisite proportion and counterpoise.

It is in the work of Euripides that we first feel a mind which has discerned a new value in the dramatic approach to life, a value with which the modern mind is much more familiar than with the spiritual grandeur of Aeschylus, or the inspired traditionalism of Sophocles. This new attitude was that of the intellectual critic. It brought what had been always more or less in the nature of a religious exercise definitely to the standard of real life. The problem of heroic sin became the problem of human frailty, and the towering forms of myth and history turned into realistic character-studies of full-length figures of flesh and blood. Yet the

course of Euripides' plots is still dominated by all the supernatural machinery which is such a stumbling block to the complete enjoyment of Greek plays, and his thought is inextricably bound up with the formulas of Greek religious beliefs. In his work, indeed, there seem to be three standards of value, which correspond to the groups into which serious dramatists tend to arrange themselves for purposes of discussion. There is the standard of *supernaturalism* which we have seen illustrated already in Aeschylus and Eliot, which shows the action of men as part of a divinely ordered scheme of redemption and reconciliation; there is the *humanism*, the emphasis on the value of the individual, which we associate especially with the tragic drama of the Elizabethans; and there is the spirit of critical challenge and intellectual inquiry, which led to the *naturalism* of our own day. It is perhaps because of this divided allegiance, as it were, that Euripides, in spite of his modern flavor, is the least satisfying artist among the great Greeks.

§

Marlowe stands in something of the same relation to the drama of his day, as Euripides did to his. The stage had, of course, been completely secularized before he wrote: indeed the direct treatment of religious subjects was prohibited in the theatres. Hence, although in the poetry of the age we find plenty of examples of emotional belief in the Christian ethic, and of the relationship between a spiritual and a material universe, we do not find them on the stage. There, in tragedy, the classical influence of the Renaissance was supreme, and that influence meant, in effect, the influence of Seneca. As a result, gloomy moral disquisitions in formal declamatory verse about the fall of princes removed tragedy

to a respectful but chilly distance from the standards of any common experience. Its use, as Sidney declared, was to teach the uncertainty of this world 'and upon how weak foundations golden roofs are builded.' It did have one other use which he allowed, however, which was that of 'stirring the effects of admiration and commiseration,' and it was this aspect which helped in the creation of the future glories of English tragedy. It emphasized the dignity and the isolation of the individual soul. It represented man as the victim of a malign and meaningless fate against which human effort was useless, and a stern stoic endurance the only possible weapon. This was not, as one can imagine, a very fruitful field for dramatic conflict; but though it showed man as quite powerless to be anything except the static captain of his soul, it did emphasize his mastery there. Marlowe, like Euripides, brought the material of drama to the level of the critical intelligence. Instead of accepting the dramatic scene as a vale of tears, where man, the victim of a malignant chance, retreated into the lonely citadel of his own soul, and drew up the drawbridge after him, he shifted the dramatic lists to the soul itself, and to the dynamic activity of that 'perilous stuff' which breeds and seethes within it. Character becomes the motive power behind action. At the same time, again like Euripides, he brought

all the large effects

That troop with majesty,

to the standards of a common and more familiar life. In *Tamburlaine*, the story of the peasant who became emperor, he declared that Nature 'doth teach us all to have aspiring minds,' and sang the glories and triumphs of sheer individual practical achievement: while in the history of Dr. Faustus, the bourgeois student, we watch the conflict of

good and evil in the human soul, and man, deliberately and of choice, working out his own perdition, cutting down with his own hands that branch 'that might have grown full straight.'

§

I have always come to this certainty: what moves natural men in the arts is what moves them in life, and that is, intensity of personal life. . . . They must go out of the theatre with the strength they live by strengthened with looking upon some passion that could, whatever its chosen way of life, strike down an enemy, fill a long stocking with money, or move a girl's heart.¹

If Yeats is right in this conviction, there is no question that the Elizabethan drama is the greatest drama in the world. Here we are in a world utterly different from that of Aeschylus and Sophocles. There, however high the passion, or violent the story, the surface of the drama is controlled, tranquil and cool. We never have the illusion of life, for it never aims at such an illusion. It is art; remote, objective, insulated, a distillation from the human mind and spirit, but never the rough wine of life itself. Here, among the Elizabethans, we are in the world of men and women. Of men and women who do unusual and surprising things it is true, who see ghosts, and watch dumb-shows of coffins and madmen, who run mad themselves, and carry about the skulls of their murdered loved ones, and disguise themselves, and drink love potions; who love and murder and kill themselves with equally superb vigor, and who love and lust and hate and aspire and despair and explain themselves in poetry of surpassing energy and splendor.

But in spite of all that, they are men and women who *live*,

¹ *The Cutting of an Agate.*

vividly, turbulently, potently. Their creators are fascinated by them, they glory in them. They are absorbed in their qualities and attributes, and as much in their faculties of evil as of good. There again, they differ radically from the Greeks. The Greeks pondered deeply over the problem of evil, but Aristotle did not define tragedy as the drama which dealt with evil and misery, but as the drama which dealt with virtue and nobility. The Greeks took no delight in wickedness for its own sake, or in the examination and analysis of sin except as a philosophic question. No great sinner, no creature of positive evil is the central figure in any Greek tragedy. Clytemnestra and Medea act horribly, but they both revenge themselves for wrongs which they have suffered, and have therefore a kind of wild justice about them. But in Elizabethan tragedy, the villain-hero is as common as the noble hero, and the poets from Marlowe onwards delight to anatomize these hard hearts and see what breeds about them. Clytemnestra is a figure of surpassing grandeur, but she is a simple element in a huge pattern of universal sin and punishment; she plays her part, and remains static and consistent in quality. Lady Macbeth is a particular and unique individual. She is an equally terrible figure in her crime, who might equally say 'For me, I glory,' when her design is accomplished, but her scope is human, not superhuman. She is a creature of flesh and blood, who can see her father in the sleeping Duncan, and whose 'infected mind' causes so great a 'perturbation in nature' that it drives her to her death. So too with the 'motiveless malignity' of Iago, the filthy cynicism of Thersites, the sickening savagery of Regan; they are all fashioned with as great a creative gusto as any that Shakespeare put into a Brutus or a Desdemona. Or compare Hamlet and Orestes. They have many points in common, but although

Orestes has seen his mother pollute her honor, and is himself an outcast, he is not a man whose whole consciousness is choked with the sense of evil—to whom the world has become ‘a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours,’ who has only to think of love for his mind to jump to the idea of the sun breeding maggots in a dead dog, or of his mother’s action to burst out,

Nay, but to live,
In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed,
Stew’d in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty.

There is the same spirit in the plays of other dramatists: in the psychological study of megalomania and hysteria in Chapman’s *Byron’s Tragedy*, the picture of what the irresponsible Tamburlaines of the world really come to; and later, as the great Elizabethan age declined into decay, in the group of playwrights who reflect the outlook of complete disillusionment and despair which we are apt to associate more with the early twentieth century than with the early seventeenth.¹

In *The Revenger’s Tragedy* and *The Atheist’s Tragedy* of Tourneur, for instance, there is a peculiar sense of loathing for life, a vision of a Machiavellian materialistic universe entirely devoid of spiritual significance, and a withering, ruthless probing of the evil and meanness of man’s nature. Or we feel it again in Webster, with those flaming figures of evil, Vittoria Corombona and her brother; or in even greater detail in his creation of the enemies and murderers of the Duchess of Malfi. The later Elizabethan delight in the sinister and the fiendish could hardly go further than the whole atmosphere of that powerful and horrible play, with

¹ See *The Jacobean Drama*, by U. M. Ellis-Fermor, for a full and most interesting account of these playwrights.

the contrasted portraits of the treacherous yet repentant Bosola, of the terrifying quiet pitilessness of the Cardinal, and of the intensity of fanatical hatred in Ferdinand.

I would have their bodies
Burnt in a coal-pit with the ventage stopped,
That their cursed smoke might not ascend to Heaven.
Or dip the sheets they lie in in pitch or sulphur,
Wrap them in't, and then light them like a match;
Or else to boil their bastard to a cullis,
And give't his lecherous father to renew
The sin of his back.

§

This intensity of personal life is felt in every aspect of man as revealed in Elizabethan tragedy—in his body, mind and spirit.

Is not birth, beauty, good shape, discourse, manhood, learning, gentleness, virtue, youth, liberality and such like, the spice and salt that seasons a man? ¹

We have only to think of Tamburlaine, striding from conquest to conquest in all the splendor of his personal vigor; of Rosalind swinging along with her gallant curtle axe upon her thigh, her boarspear in her hand; of Juliet teaching the torches to burn bright with her beauty; of Henry V waving his sword before his men standing like greyhounds in the slips, straining upon the start; of Hamlet and his unmatched form and feature of blown youth; or even of Cressida with her wanton spirits looking out from every joint and motive of her body—to feel the radiance of physical vitality which streams from the characters of Elizabethan

¹ *Troilus and Cressida* I, ii.

plays. We have only to listen to Claudio thinking of death to realize the depth of their feeling for life.

Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice;
To be imprisoned in the viewless winds
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world . . . 'tis too horrible! ¹

And their physical beauty and vigor is matched by their emotional vitality. These men and women who do such splendid and peculiar things all throb and burn and glow and suffer ecstasy and agony, rapture and despair as no other dramatic characters have ever done. To the Greeks, the passion of love was a tragic madness, a relentless frenzy which drove otherwise sane creatures, like Medea and Phaedra, into crime and shame. It had nothing tender and sensitive about it: indeed the idea of such love being one of the major values of life never occurred to them. It never appears to have occurred to anyone until the coming of the troubadours in France in the eleventh century. Then, apparently from nothing, Venus rising from the sea, was born this new supreme value—romantic passion. It revolutionized all ethic, all literature, all behavior, and five hundred years later it gave us *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *The Broken Heart*, *The Revenger's Tragedy*, *The Duchess of Malfi*, and all those tragic heroes who can say with Antony,

The nobleness of life
Is to do this . . .

¹ *Measure for Measure* III, i.

None of these plays or these heroes, or indeed the whole structure of modern society, would have existed if a certain school of French lyric poets in the Middle Ages had not invented the glamorous glories of adultery.

'Love is only one among the passions, and it has no great influence upon the sum of life,' said Dr. Johnson, but as the other positive passions of men have become tamer and cooler—or as their expression in drama, at any rate, has become tamer and cooler and more limited—sexual passion has become more and more important to the dramatist. It seems the only passion which continues to function, either for good or evil, among the peaceful and prosperous. When Eugene O'Neill rewrites the *Oresteia* in the terms of his own age the characters become just a group of sex-starved neurotics. But to the Elizabethans, love was still only one among the passions, in spite of its importance to their stage. They extended its romance to marriage, and they write of it as no other dramatic poets have done, but they write too of other positive values. There is the civilized and artistic public spirit and generosity of Timon, with his standards of the good life based upon the enjoyment of art, music, poetry, hospitality and friendship.

A most incomparable man, breathed, as it were,
To an untirable and continue goodness;

a very different ideal from the irresponsible individualism of Tamburlaine. We have only to think, again, of Shakespeare's history plays, with their passionate love of country, or of the noble and constructive political idealism of Chapman, as illustrated in the figure of Henry IV in the Byron plays, to see another of the enthusiasms of the Elizabethans. Their patriotism was inevitably bound up with their glorification of war, and all that nobility and grandeur of leader-

ship and valor which Othello symbolizes in the early scenes of the play, and in his death, and which Antony stands for before he lost himself in 'dotage.' And this, again, is part of the general worship of courage and resolution. 'A faint and milky' heart is the only disqualification for the Elizabethan hero.

The mind I sway by and the heart I bear
Shall never sag with doubt nor shake with fear

exclaims even the murder-stained and hag-ridden Macbeth,

Look upon my steadiness and scorn not
The sickness of my fortune,

cries Orgilus in *The Broken Heart*; while Chapman voices the aspiration of the whole age.

Give me a spirit that on this life's rough sea,
Loves t'have his sails filled with a lusty wind,
Even till his sail-yards tremble; his masts crack,
And his rapt ship run on her side so low
That she drinks water, and her keel ploughs air;
There is no danger to a man, that knows
What life and death is: there's not any law,
Exceeds his knowledge; neither is it lawful
That he should stoop to any other law.

To the men of the Renaissance, with their passionate love of life and their denial of the Church's doctrine of immortality, it was natural that Death should be the supreme significance in the universe. Hence the popularity of tragedy in the theatre, as the drama which dealt with this supreme issue, and hence their emphasis on courage before death as the supreme virtue. For the Elizabethans prove their intensity of living as much by the power of their characters to suffer, as to enjoy their ecstasies and their idealisms.

Spirits are not finely touched
But to fine issues,

and it is their blending of endurance and sensibility which gives them their extreme poignancy. The courage of the weak is as indomitable as that of the strong—the courage of Juliet, or Cordelia, of Ford's Giovanni and Annabella; or the matchless sweetness and dignity of Webster's Duchess, affirming in all the agony of her torture,

I am Duchess of Malfi still.

§

We associate the Elizabethan drama with physical and emotional vitality rather than with intellectual force, and it is very natural that we should. Both the spirit of the age and the conditions governing the stage discouraged any reflective bent of mind. The general tone of national buoyancy was one reason for this, combined with the strict refusal of the authorities to have any political matters referred to in public; and the popular acceptance of stage characters whose motives were inconsistent and whose stories were quite irrational was another excellent reason for eschewing the critical spirit. Provided that something exciting was going on on the stage, and provided that they could listen to rousing and stimulating language, the Elizabethan audience were apparently satisfied.

I have already spoken of the later plays, with their coloring of disillusionment—the result partly of the change in the national and social atmosphere, partly of the immense influence of the outlook and cynicism of Machiavelli. Here, indeed, we do find an effort to intellectualize the material of drama. *The Atheist's Tragedy* is like the problem play

of a later age, and Middleton's sardonic detachment in *The Changeling* emphasizes the relentless interplay of cause and effect and the workings of ruthless psychological laws.

. . . settle you
In what the act has made you . . .
You are the deed's creature,

says one character to another, and it might almost be Ibsen speaking.

In only one play does Shakespeare forsake his usual path of romantic dramatist to be critic and analyst, and what, one wonders, did the Elizabethan audience make of *Troilus and Cressida* and Shakespeare's cynical exposure in it of all the values which he and his fellow dramatists were accustomed to extol? For that is what he does in this very odd play. He subjects love, war, patriotism, monarchy and leadership, to the searing contact of a realistic vision. Beside the romantic selflessness of Troilus, he puts the falsity of Cressida and the direct realism of Diomed; beside the chivalrous valor of Hector, the egotism of Achilles and the block-headed vanity of Ajax; beside the symbolic romance of Helen, the comments of Thersites and Diomed upon her; beside all the self-sacrifice and high purpose of the Trojans, all the materialism and earthiness of the Greeks. He sets the world of romantic illusion against the world of hard fact, and shows derisively that facts triumph over illusions. Paris, the romantic, asks Diomed, the realist, who really deserves Helen best, himself or Menelaus.

Diomed.

Both alike:

He merits well to have her that doth seek her,
Not making any scruple of her soilure,
With such a hell of pain and world of charge.
And you as well to keep her, that defend her,

Not palating the taste of her dishonour,
With such a costly loss of wealth and friends:
He, like a puling cuckold, would drink up
The lees and dregs of a flat tamed piece,
You, like a lecher, out of whorish loins
Are pleased to breed out your inheritors:
Both merits poised, each weighs nor less nor more,
But he as he, the heavier for a whore.

Paris. You are too bitter to your countrywoman.

Diomed. She's bitter to her country: hear me, Paris:

For every false drop in her bawdy veins
A Grecian life hath sunk; for every scruple
Of her contaminated carrion weight,
A Trojan hath been slain: since she could speak,
She hath not given so many good words breath
As for her Greeks and Trojans suffer'd death.

Even when Troilus and Hector shift the question on to the plane of abstractions, the argument of Troilus for the absolute values of chivalry is easily shown for the practical nonsense it is by the common-sense of Hector. Indeed, Shakespeare shows an analytical quality in this play, which never seems to visit him again, and which is unlike anything else in Elizabethan drama. The course of the action, with its cynical juxtapositions and implicit criticisms between valor and vanity, between stupidity and 'the still and mental parts,' is varied continuously with direct arguments about subtle and elusive values; about the rival forces of emotion and reason, about individualism and the social order, about the metaphysics of love, and about 'envious and calumniating Time'—that jostling, trampling, pitiless and inexorable figure who rules the universe with his senseless cycles of destruction and forgetfulness.

What Shakespeare does in poetry in *Troilus and Cressida* is very much what the naturalistic dramatists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have done in prose. Not, of course, that their *tone* is that of the disgust and contempt which colors *Troilus and Cressida*, but their aim is to abjure the heroic scale of values and to substitute the standards of realistic experience: to abandon rhetoric in favor of life. The loss is a great one. Even the super-realist Shaw acknowledges the undying exaltation and excitement which live in great romantic drama.

For all that, the land of dreams is a wonderful place. . . . These artists were pure enchanters, who conjured up a region where existence touches you delicately to the very heart, and where mysteriously thrilling people, secretly known to you in dreams of your childhood, enact a life in which terrors are as fascinating as delights, so that ghosts and death, agony and sin, become, like love and victory, phases of an unaccountable ecstasy.¹

But it was inevitable that there should be a reaction from it all, especially from all the flatulent sentimentalism which it degenerated into in the Victorian age, more particularly as the trend of knowledge and investigation led to a new and different view of the place of man in the universe. Although the Renaissance shifted the center of gravity in tragedy from the organism of the plot to emotional situation involving individual men and women, the Elizabethans all accepted the central classical and Christian doctrine that man had control over his own conduct. Temptation was common to all, and the strength to resist and the weakness to fall lay equally in all: every man had freedom of choice to act nobly or basely. No member of an Elizabethan audience would accept, any more than Hamlet himself did, that the

¹ *Dramatic Opinions and Essays.*

paralysis of his will was a symptom of a disordered nervous system or a deficiency in the functioning of his thyroid gland, and was therefore quite beyond his own control. He knows that he has 'cause and will and strength and means to do 't,' and the tragedy would be meaningless unless he had.

This made for a great social drama in which dramatists and audience were united in a simple ethical and emotional response to all experience represented on the stage. But the naturalistic drama rejected such easy generalizations and demanded a very much wider field of experience as dramatic material. The romantic setting gives way to the interiors of ordinary middle-class homes, where Ibsen showed middle-class citizens of provincial towns with all the same intensities of emotional experience as the heroes and villains of romance, and Chekov revealed in a small section of Russian society, egotism as greedy, sex as obsessing, suffering as aching, sacrifice as pure, and disappointment as devastating as any in any other drama. It is true there is no positive intensity of life in Chekov. Deliberately he subdued the whole to that low-toned, negative and autumnal atmosphere of a civilization doomed and fading, a generation of men and women who listen irresponsibly to the axes which fell its cherry orchard; who suffer the tortures of frustration, and are powerless to act; who cry with Uncle Vanya when Yelena tells him he ought to reconcile people instead of quarreling, 'Reconcile me to myself first!'; who spend their time in emotional reverie, in abstract discussion and psychological analysis; who never look at any practical matter practically; who make whole lives out of unhappy love; who are equally incompetent at work or play, equally incapable of industry or leisure, who drift in a world of romantic illusion—the illusion that they are the victims of circum-

stance and not of character; and whose only gesture before their fate is to say with Sonya 'There is nothing for it. We must go on living.'

Both Chekov's artistry and his humanity are too sensitive for any harshness of satire in his plays, but the naturalistic playwrights soon used the drama as a challenge to the accepted conclusions of the society they lived in. They invented the satiric play which is an indictment not of any Hardy-esque spirit of evil, operating in the cosmos, or of the Machiavellian individual wicked villain, but of social and economic forces which crush the free spirit of man. Galsworthy, Toller, Elmer Rice and Odets expose not the inevitable and eternal troubles of our proud and angry dust, but the suffering which a man-made social system imposes on humanity.

There is the same change in the creation of individual character. As Shaw says of his own *St. Joan*:

There are no villains in the piece. Crime, like disease, is not interesting. . . . It is what men do at their best, with good intentions, and what normal men and women find that they must and will do in spite of their intentions, that really concern us.

Thus Uncle Vanya has spent his life trying to help the Professor, and ends by trying to shoot him and by making love to his wife; Mrs. Solness in *The Master Builder* continues to live in a loveless desolation, poisoning her own life and her husband's, while continuing to do what she regards as her duty; the characters in O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*, all supposedly united in a passionate patriotism, loot and lie and become callous and cruel and purely self-interested when the real test of their quality comes; while Auden and Isherwood in *The Ascent of F6* have created a powerful tragedy from the ironic clash between the public

view of a romantic and courageous hero, and the real mind of the man—moved by complex and conflicting motives and emotions of which he himself is only half aware.

The naturalistic hero or heroine, instead of sinning, consciously or unconsciously, against a traditional code of morals, resolve, for good or ill, the qualities in their own natures which have made them what they are. They illustrate the operation of psychological, not ethical, laws. The wife in Strindberg's *The Father* brings ruin upon her husband and child by the working out of her own particular neurotic hatred; Hedda Gabler relentlessly works out the course of her obsessing egotism. But, to be effective, the psychological observation in such plays must be related to some large normal vision of life as a whole. It is here that O'Neill fails so dismally in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. He deliberately provokes comparison with the Greek myth by his title, but in his hands that fable of revenge provoking revenge, but concluding in final harmony, becomes a mere pathological casebook. We are told that he portrays 'the tragic significance of a world in which "character" has given way to the powers of the subconscious mechanisms and complexes and compulsions which give human fate the cruel significance of animals trapped by forces within themselves over which they have no control,' and that it is the 'courageous acceptance of the implications of the scientific world-view that gives its effect of tremendous tragedy.'¹ But such praise hardly seems justified. If the scientific world-view had really left us with the view of humanity as rats in traps, there would be something to say for the poverty of spirit and meanness of living exhibited in O'Neill's tragic world, and there would certainly be a terrible irony in the illusions of human grandeur cherished by Aeschylus and Sophocles

¹ *The Art of the Drama*. Millett and Bentley.

now being shrunk to the standards of the scientific truth of the Mannons. But the extensions of knowledge about the mysteries of man's nature which modern psychological science has made, are, after all, not *destructive* but *constructive* forces in the final goal of man's control of his own nature. The science which has diagnosed the ills which are outside the control of man, has never ceased patiently to investigate the means of bringing them back within his control. All that O'Neill does in *Mourning Becomes Electra* (aside from some good melodrama) is to diagnose a group of people all suffering in one form or another from some kind of sexual abnormality or repression, and to illustrate how it brings them all to disaster. But there is no more 'tremendous tragedy' about that than about the stories of the thousands of similar cases which belong to medical history. The only way to make tragedy out of the Mannons would have been to put the story at a date when they could have known the truth about themselves and have attempted to fight it. Success in the struggle would have produced a conclusion of harmony won through suffering, corresponding in some way to the *Eumenides*, and failure would have had the irony essential to tragedy in its picture of the gap between man's efforts and his performance. It would have had more of the effect of *Strange Interlude*, which was at least an interesting failure. As it is, to watch the various ways in which various neurotics go to pieces is merely dull, and to have it all told in such a portentous tone of voice does not make it any more impressive.

Compare it, for example, with a tragedy where, equally, human nature is shown in the light of a modern view, but by a mind which sees the greatness as well as the weakness of man: which shows man struggling to harmonize himself and his environment in accordance with the ideals of

his heart and mind, yet enmeshed in a tangle of circumstance and relationships which forbid it. As Rosmer and Rebecca West face their future, he says: 'There is no judge over us, and therefore we must do justice upon ourselves.' Their ethical standard is their own. We have only to compare Rebecca with Clytemnestra or with Lady Macbeth to see the complete difference in the focus. We have said that Clytemnestra was a great figure in a ritual design of murder and revenge, and that Lady Macbeth was a Clytemnestra with a freedom to be a human being as well as a symbol in an artist's vision. But Rebecca is a Clytemnestra and a Lady Macbeth with a freedom to function both emotionally *and intellectually* in a realistic setting. 'I went to work,' she says, describing how she prepared what was virtually the murder of Beata; much as Clytemnestra cries 'For me, I glory.' But when Rosmer and Kroll question her, she shows herself a complex, self-critical, breathing human creature, so close to us in her living reality that the illusion of art is almost broken.

Rebecca. It seemed to me I had to choose between your life and hers, Rosmer.

Kroll (severely and impressively). The choice was not for you to make.

Rebecca (vehemently). You think then that I was cool and calculating and self-possessed all the time! I was not the same woman then that I am now, as I stand here telling it all. Besides, there are two sorts of will in us, I believe! I wanted Beata away, by one means or another; but I never really believed that it would come to pass. As I felt my way forward, at every step I ventured, I seemed to hear something within me cry out: No further! Only one hair's-breadth more. And then one more—and always one more.—And then it happened.—That is the way such things come about. (*a short silence.*)

Rosmer. What do you think lies before you now? After this?

Rebecca. Things must go with me as they will. It doesn't greatly matter.

Kroll. Not a word of remorse! Is it possible you feel none?

Rebecca. Excuse me, Rector Kroll—that is a matter which concerns no one but me. I must settle it with myself.

§

Commenting on *Rosmersholm*, Ibsen said that it dealt with the struggle which every serious-minded man must face in order to bring his life into harmony with his convictions. At the end Ibsen resolves that struggle into a tragic outcome which we feel to be the inevitable and completely satisfying conclusion to it: and indeed so thorough and profound is Ibsen's interpenetration of character and event in his great dramas that they produce invariably that sense of acquiescence which is always a characteristic effect of great art.

But this question of the total impression left by tragedy is an interesting one. 'Of this I am assured, that Death ends all,' says Faustus, and it does in many plays: but neither death, nor an ending without death, ends all in any fine drama. It leaves the audience in some particular frame of mind, and there has been endless critical discussion as to what state of mind it does leave them in.

I believe the question to be complicated by a confusion between artistic and human values: a very natural confusion since drama is so closely related to life. But I think those critics who declare that any fine tragedy leaves the spectators in a state of exaltation, are speaking only of an aesthetic effect. The impact of any fine serious play on a sensitive and trained intelligence produces a deep sense of enjoyment and satisfaction, which is the effect on the whole consciousness of the growth and completion of an artistic unity. It is the

result of that welding power with which the dramatist creates the sense of cohesion and depth and richness in the dramatic movement. At the conclusion of any fine play, therefore, we have the sense of a complete and harmonious experience, and the result of that triumphant functioning of what we call Form has produced those particular feelings of assurance and serenity which are, perhaps, the *dominating* emotions with which we leave the theatre. But it is quite possible, I am sure, to have these emotions while, at the same time, the *human* emotions generated by the play have nothing at all of harmony or serenity in them. It is a strangely constituted person who can come away from the *Oedipus Tyrannus* or *The Trojan Women* or *The Father* or *The Wild Duck* or *Justice* or *The Three Sisters* or *Winterset* with any emotional equilibrium in his heart, and it is significant that people who are not sensitive to drama as a form of art, but respond to it merely as a story, never find any enjoyment in these plays. They are merely depressed by them, and say that if they want that sort of thing they can read the daily papers or listen to the conversation of their friends. Such things as the murder of Astyanax and the grief of Hecuba, the pitiful death of poor little Hedvig, the incurable heartache of the three sisters, the desolating injustice of *Justice*, the cruel waste of the love and lives of Mio and Miriamne, if we regard them simply as a picture of life, can obviously produce nothing except indignant rebellion against, or mournful acceptance of, the helplessness of man and the cruelties of destiny.

It was perhaps because of this inevitable reaction to certain plays that Plato thought tragedy harmful and weakening to the moral fiber by calling out unmanly feelings, and that Aristotle thought of a way out of that dilemma by declaring that it was healthful to man to be purged of these

feelings in the theatre, so that they should not adversely affect his value to the community outside. But in any case, I do not see how they can be denied.

But that there is a sense of complete emotional harmony at the conclusion of some tragedies is attested by universal experience. It is present in all those tragedies—and they are, I think, the greatest—where everything in the play is, as it were, concluded with the play: where, at the end, the wheel has come full circle, and everything within the scope of the action, all the mental and emotional excitement it has aroused, has been resolved into a finite reconciliation and harmony which the mind and heart willingly accept, and in which they find peace. Such are the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, and among Shakespeare's plays, *Lear*, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. If we accept that *Lear* is a gigantic symbol of the nature of the universe, comparable in its own way with the *Oresteia*, we can accept its ghastly picture of natural and human injustice and cruelty as part of its completeness. They are balanced by the exquisite picture of perfect love and joy which is the reconciliation of Lear and Cordelia. Had Lear's heart, like Gloucester's, 'burst smilingly' at that point, the play could be interpreted on a simple basis of a purgatorial philosophy of suffering and redemption. By that last stroke of sheer fate, Cordelia's death, any such simple and personal exposition becomes impossible. The universe remains incalculable up to the last, indifferent to the fate of the individual, who perishes in his infinite littleness saying, 'Undo this button,' and with a last wild self-deïusion that happiness has returned to him. But the happiness did exist, as whole and complete as the agony which preceded and followed it, and it is impossible to say that there is more of 'the nature of infinity' in the one or the other.

The conclusions of *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*

are on a smaller scale, and satisfy us so well, partly, perhaps, because they are both consistent with the measure of human justice. But it is rather the spirit of defiance and resolution in which their heroes meet their fates than the fact that they get their deserts which moves us so deeply. They are the very essence of 'valour's show and valour's worth' as described by Nestor in *Troilus and Cressida*,

when the splitting wind
Makes flexible the knees of knotted oaks,
And flies fled under shade, why then the thing of courage
As roused with rage with rage doth sympathize,
And with an accent tuned in self-same key
Retorts to chiding fortune.

The fact that *Othello* and *Hamlet* are each also a 'thing of courage' has something to do with the sense of triumph which lingers even at the end of these plays, and which is harder to explain. For in these plays the course of the action has *not* resolved the emotions which it has generated into any conclusive harmony, and any such sense of harmony we may achieve about them must depend upon some mystical reference to ultimate and absolute human values. Ophelia and Desdemona are dead, the most innocent of helpless victims, and the heroes themselves have been infinitely more sinned against than sinning. 'The readiness is all,' says Hamlet, as he contemplates his own death: but that is not the feeling of the spectators *about* Hamlet. It is rather a passion of protest that anything so lovable, so unusual, so full of intellectual and emotional sensitiveness and vigor, should be wasted and sacrificed in a struggle with such a creature as Claudius. Othello has done more to forfeit the full sympathy of the audience before his death, but the vision of him in all his noble simplicity and courage returns in full force at the end and we have the same passion of pro-

test that the base and vile Iago should have had the power to devastate his grandeur.

Yet in spite of this sense of cruel injustice, the final impression is undoubtedly the affirmation of some higher values than those of mere temporal justice.

'Tis immortality to die aspiring

cries one of Chapman's heroes, and this sums up the philosophy of the humanistic drama. Though the facts of the stories may seem to prove the exact opposite, the conviction alive at the end of *Othello* or *Hamlet* or *Antigone* is that somehow nobility and loyalty and honesty and innocence and courage are the ultimate values, and that they are imperishable and absolute.

This is the glory of earth-born men and women,
not to cringe, never to yield, but standing,
take defeat implacable and defiant,
die unsubmitting.¹

§

It is still customary, I think, among English-speaking readers and theatregoers, to accept the humanistic conclusions of tragedy as the richest and deepest dramatic expression of their experience. While most of us can no longer respond in anything but a partial way to the great ritual drama of the Greeks, the emotional and romantic idealism of Shakespeare—in spite of what T. S. Eliot calls his 'rag bag philosophy'—finds an echo in most normal hearts. And indeed the romantic convention, when lit and vitalized by the poetic glories of Shakespeare, is a very splendid and spirited convention. But it is also a very limited one, and at

¹ *Winterset*.

its worst it produces a kind of emotional elephantiasis which distorts any true proportion of vision. It does not see life steadily and see it whole. And drama is an art which can take the whole of life as we know it as its province. It can, of course, work in any convention. If the dramatist so wish, he can still express his vision in terms of legend and ritual, as Eliot does in *Murder in the Cathedral*; or he can still lift the heart by reminding us of the deathless emotional values of great heroic figures. But we do not want either of these things done in the spirit of a past age. Shaw was right in his claim that we need in every age a new statement of the problems of man and the universe. No age is exactly like any other age, nor are the men and women who live in it exactly like those of other ages. More particularly do we feel this about our own age, as it is perhaps natural that we should. It seems to us that we live in a time of unexampled changes—in our knowledge of the nature of the universe, in the structure of our society, in our knowledge of the nature of man. Nothing that the Greeks or the Elizabethans can say about these things can possibly state them for us in our time.

The adult lover of the contemporary theatre, therefore, seeks in it the dramatist who will reveal the world of modern men and women, their problems, their personalities, their background of ideas and knowledge, the quality of their civilization. He wants to watch in it the clashes which belong to his own age and to his own society. He craves, not to escape into the past, but to see and hear, through contemporary drama, familiar figures of his own world, alive in the way in which he is alive, living life on the terms on which he has to live it, and who will yet remind him that behind himself are the traditions of all humanity: that

such figures, though they are individual and particular, are still symbols and glimpses of the eternal passions and weaknesses and follies and loyalties, of the eternal relationships and discords and deadlocks of common humanity. The last generation possessed such a dramatist. He did not bring the emotional intoxication of the great romantics; his language had none of the stimulating, uplifting qualities of verse; and most of us must in any case always read him and hear him through the mists of a translation. He provokes no easy theatrical response. But in his implicit criticism and indictment of everything which is sordid and selfish, of all life which is shackled and warped, of all the barriers of convention and stupidity, of pettiness and jealousy and cruelty which stand between man and his freedom; and in the absorbing interest he creates in watching personality forge action and action modify personality, in the steady revelation of that mixture of the commonplace and the miraculous, the familiar and the surprising, which is the truth of human character, the greatest artist in the world is still Henrik Ibsen.

But Ibsen's world is no longer our world, and we have as yet no great serious dramatist who can be spoken of in the same breath with him. We have playwrights who have given us brilliant individual facets of our civilization, or revelations of individual points of view active in forming certain elements in our general social texture—Maxwell Anderson, Clifford Odets, Elmer Rice, Eugene O'Neill, T. S. Eliot, are all such writers. But there has been no great artist who has synthesized the complex and conflicting elements in twentieth-century living into an ordered and coherent vision. The nearest approach to such a thing is certainly *The Ascent of F6*, by W. H. Auden and Christopher

Isherwood. In Michael Ransom, the hero of that play, we do see a symbol of civilized, sensitive manhood of the present day. We see him against the social forces which surround us all: the differing personalities of his friends, the poverty and triviality of existence among the uneducated and impecunious, the absorbing self-interest of the governing classes and the Press, the stupidity and vulgarity and superficiality of the standards of popular appeal.

I do not know if I interpret aright the course of his quest. It seems to me that Auden's vision is that what vitiates Ransom's chance of fulfillment is his lack of true self-knowledge, and that the main theme of the play is the extreme difficulty and the extreme importance of achieving that. Ransom does not rightly understand his own motives for his adventure, hence to what end he is truly working. He is indignant against his brother's pursuit of material success, yet there is no real harmony in his own soul. His motive for going is really only the result of a repressed longing to stand well in his mother's eyes, as is proved by the figure on the summit turning out to be his mother, and the achievement of his reaching the summit being symbolized in the lilting nursery songs sung by her, which represent presumably his long-repressed yearning for the mother-love she had denied him in childhood.

I cannot believe that the authors intended nothing but a narrow Freudian interpretation of the whole story, and I take it that the particular repression which vitiated Ransom's self-harmony is a symbol of all the forces of the unconscious, and the ineradicable wrongs inflicted by others on children, which are *one* of the causes of human failure.

Acts of injustice done
Between the setting and the rising sun
In history lie like bones, each one.

Other causes of failure are the social and political systems which are satirized in other characters, as well as the main theme of the ignorance of man of his own nature.

There can hardly be a greater contrast between the spirit of this play and that of the great Elizabethans. Ransom's first speech emphasizes his belief that civilization is a 'general fiasco.'

For of that growth which in maturity had seemed eternal it is now no hint of thought or feeling that has tarnished, but the great ordered flower itself is withering. . . .

And the last chorus, instead of singing of the indomitable fire of the individual spirit, points inexorably to its defeat.

By all his virtues flouted,
From every refuge routed
And driven far from home;
At last his journey ended,
Forgiven and befriended,
See him to his salvation come.

Free now from indignation,
Immune from all frustration
He lies in death alone;
Now he with secret terror
And every minor error
Has also made Man's weakness known.

8

POETRY

DRAMA IS HUMAN LIFE PRE-
sented in terms of the theatre. Its medium is words: and since poetry is of all uses of words the widest, deepest and richest, it follows that the highest achievements of drama have always been conceived and written in poetry.

I say *conceived* and written, because poetry is not a mere medium in which a certain sort of drama happens to be written. The writers of nineteenth-century poetic drama thought it was: hence the dullness and deadness of their work. They took a romantic or historical story and decorated it with poetic diction to give it a literary flavor. Poetic drama was the birthday cake of theatrical fare: something very special which only appeared seldom, something

too great or good
For human nature's daily food.

Its language was deliberately archaic: sometimes, as in Shelley's *The Cenci*, as Shakespearean as possible; or later, the result of a deliberate policy of creating an atmosphere of mysterious romantic beauty, which was to take the place of any religious or moral stimulus to be gained from drama. Maeterlinck was the creator of this type of poetic drama. In the preface to his collected plays he analyzes the kind of

romantic fatalism he feels behind all human life. He is aware, he says, of huge malevolent implacable powers, hostile to all happiness, always at work in the world, and bringing death, despair, and destruction indifferently to all. This is the radical and final truth of human existence, and all that humanity can do in the face of it is to create a few gestures of grace and tenderness, of courage and hope, of pity and love. But the function of the poet is to add an element of beauty and grandeur to the inexorable facts of life. He has a hidden force which elevates his language above common experience, and can touch the tragic senselessness of living into something which partakes of the infinite and deathless. The result is the mournful music of Maeterlinck's plays. It certainly creates an atmosphere all its own, but it is an atmosphere which, instead of giving intensity to drama, seems to make it infinitely remote and artificial. It is all rather like the description of the sound of the tidal bore in Masfield's *Nan*—'a-wammering and a-wammering.'

There is the same atmosphere of 'escape poetry' in the early poetic romances of Yeats, and in Stephen Phillips, whose *Paolo and Francesca* seemed great poetry to the theatregoing public of a generation ago, when Maeterlinckian melancholy was the fashion in tragedy. But it was all very bogus. When Giovanni sees the bodies of the lovers lying dead, he is overcome with their beauty, and Lucrezia cries 'What ails you now?' Giovanni replies,

She takes away my strength.
I did not know the dead could have such hair.
Hide them. They look like children fast asleep.

We have only to compare this with the scene of Ferdinand looking upon the body of the Duchess of Malfi and her

children, to feel immediately the difference between a literary affectation and the voice of a dramatist.

Ferdinand. Is she dead?

Bosola. She is what

You'd have her. . . . Do you not weep?

Ferdinand. Cover her face; mine eyes dazzle: she died young.

When drama reaches out to become as richly articulate as it can possibly be, and poetry reaches out to become as richly human as it can possibly be, the result is true poetic drama. It is not an application of one art to another, it is a fusion of two worlds of artistic experience which become another entity. This entity, however, continues to exist in the worlds of its component parts. As we have said before, a play of Shakespeare, or any other poetic play, can be criticized at a variety of levels. It is a story; it is a picture of a group of characters; and it is a sequence of individual passages of poetry of different degrees of beauty, sound and sense. But it is also a dramatic poem. The poet and the dramatist become one. Of course, one or other may obviously predominate. Maxwell Anderson in *Winterset*, for instance, is a dramatist who has found himself driven towards poetry in order both to make his characters adequately articulate, and to create the necessary heightening of pitch which he feels his tragedy demands to set it away from all the associations which its environment inevitably suggest, and give it a larger reference. T. S. Eliot, on the other hand, is a poet who has found himself driven towards the theatre, to extend his scope, and completely to objectify his material. Anderson's drama is better than his poetry: Eliot's poetry is better than his drama; but neither uses one art simply as a trimming to the other; each is organic to the whole. Both *Winterset* and *Murder in the Cathedral* have

een conceived as a unity in which the genius and method of drama have brought something to the essence of poetry, and the genius and method of poetry have brought something to the essence of drama, and they fuse and melt into each other and become indissoluble.

§

In earlier ages of dramatic history, among the Greeks and the Elizabethans, the use of poetry for drama was not a matter of choice, but of accepted convention. Drama meant poetry, just as story-telling meant epic. Poetry was the medium for the universalizing and intensifying of life which transmuted it into art, and it was taken for granted that the experiences of drama and poetry were fused, and that the serious dramatist was a poet. Poetry added the kind of ritual element which serious drama always kept: the poet was its priest. It was not until prose became the generally accepted stage medium in the eighteenth century, that the worlds of poetry and drama drifted completely apart. When the poet returned to the theatre towards the end of the nineteenth century, he was a stranger. Moreover, although his status has remained a worthy one, that of the theatre had fallen very low. The poet, therefore, regarded himself as a superior person in a somewhat disreputable and bohemian world; a person who should bring dignity and a hint of uplift with him, the touch of the bishop at the school-treat. It is no wonder that the plays he wrote embodied a very specialized distortion of life instead of a revelation of its larger aspects. The contemporary return of the poet to the theatre is something very much more genuine. He has sought the theatre as the widest and most human medium of the art of patterned language; and the welcome of the poetic play

by those who care deeply for the theatre is the public realization that unless drama relates itself to the most vivid and vital use of the language of its day, it becomes inevitably impoverished and superficial.

Because poetic drama originally used only myth and history for its material, it was by its nature withdrawn from the atmosphere of the ordinary social life of its day. This removal from 'dailiness' it has always preserved, although the degrees and quality of its remoteness vary very much. At the extreme from 'real' life stand the later poetic plays of W. B. Yeats. Yeats regards the sole function of art to be the creation in symbols of the imperishable elements in human life. Its end is 'the ecstasy awakened by the presence before an ever-changing mind of what is permanent in the world.'¹ Indeed, although one does not easily associate the minds of Bacon and Yeats together, they speak the same language about the function of poetry.

The use of this feigned history hath been to give some shadow of satisfaction to the mind of man in these points wherein the nature of things doth deny it, the world being in proportion inferior to the soul; by reason whereof there is agreeable to the spirit of man a more ample greatness, a more exact goodness, and a more absolute variety, than can be found in the nature of things.²

All imaginative art, says Yeats, remains at a distance from life. It must hold this distance firmly, and the drama which interests him is that which does so. It enables us, by means of a group of figures, and the poetry in which they are incarnated, to pass for a few moments into 'a deep of the mind' that has hitherto been too subtle for us to reach.

Now this obviously precludes a great deal of what we are

¹ Preface to Synge's *The Well of the Saints*.

² *The Advancement of Learning*.

accustomed to think of as drama. Drama to most of us may reveal deeps of the mind, but they are not generally very subtle ones. They are intense, not elusive, and they do not imply withdrawals from normal experience as Yeats's ideal does. He wants drama to 'recede from us into some more powerful life,' to translate us into the world of dreams, instead of making us linger wretchedly among substantial things. In true tragedy, he says,

If the real world is not altogether rejected, it is but touched here and there, and into the places we have left empty we summon rhythm, balance, pattern, images, that remind us of vast passions, the vagueness of past times, all the chimaeras that haunt the edge of trance.¹

This means the deliberate exclusion of character and of action for their own sake: indeed it implies a static drama, which is almost a contradiction in terms. The worlds of trance and what we usually mean by drama are antipodes. Yeats's figures hardly move. At moments of tragic intensity they stand poised, their immobility symbolizing elemental human passions, it is true, but passions in their passive, not their active, aspect. We can see it in his use of images—always a clue to the spiritual essence of the dramatic poet. When Deirdre, for instance, at the peak of the action, pleads with Conchubar to let Naoise go free in return for herself as wife, Naoise cries,

And do you think
That, were I given life at such a price,
I would not cast it from me? O my eagle!
Why do you beat vain wings upon the rock
When hollow night's above?

It is a concrete image, but its suggestions are purely abstract and static: Deirdre's vitality, Conchubar's stubborn hard-

¹ *The Tragic Theatre.*

ness of heart, and the inevitability and hopelessness of their doom. Compare it, for instance, with the image which Shakespeare puts into Isabella's mouth when she urges Angelo to mercy.

Go to your bosom;
Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know
That's like my brother's fault.

or that when Antony realizes that he will have to humble himself to Caesar.

Now I must
To the young man send humble treaties, dodge
And palter in the shifts of lowness; who
With half the bulk of the world play'd as I pleased. . . .

Or finally, that surging image which bursts from Othello when Iago suggests he may change his mind.

Never, Iago. Like to the Pontic sea,
Whose icy current and compulsive course
Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on
To the Propontic and the Hellespont;
Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace,
Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,
Till that a capable and wide revenge
Swallow them up.

Here are situations which contain the same elements as those in Yeats's play, the situations of a woman pleading for mercy, of a man feeling himself in the power of an enemy, of a jealous lover vowing revenge, but in Shakespeare all the characters are in the swirl of the situations and they use language which is active, energetic, dynamic, while Yeats's stand almost on the edge of trance, brooding, contemplative, still.

Yeats, however, evolved a form of drawing-room play, based on the Japanese Nō plays, which completely satisfied his own needs. It is a blend of lyric and narrative verse, with stylized dancing and movements, instrumental music, and the use of masks. Some of the subjects of the plays are from Irish legends, some based on the doctrines of Arabian mysticism. The musicians are the chorus, and take no part in the action; and the central element in the play is the dance, in which the rhythms of emotion, mood, music, and movement unite in one super-charged symbol. But to the average lover of the theatre, the plays of Yeats seem too remote and esoteric to be called dramatic at all. Apart from their lack of character or anything more than the most rudimentary action, they are full of direct symbolism which makes them meaningless to the uninitiated. Unless we are aware that the hawk and the heron stand as symbols of the introspective, meditative side of man, *The Hawk's Well*, for instance, is a complete riddle; and the same is true of *The Cat and the Moon*, unless we have been told that the cat is the normal man and the moon the opposite he perpetually seeks. Even with these aids, there is much which is cloudy and obscure. And drama in the theatre cannot afford to be obscure: its impact must be immediate and lucid. This is the very opposite of what Yeats wants poetic plays to be, and that is why he dislikes the public theatre and its inevitably crude and direct appeal to human fundamentals. He wants plays to exist only on that highest level of 'powerful life,' which is the inmost world of the poetic imagination. He wants poetry, too, to exist there only, and to cast out 'those energetic rhythms, as of a man running, which are the invention of the will with its eyes always on something to be done or undone.' He wants it to seek instead 'those wavering, meditative, organic rhythms which are the embodiment of the

imagination, that neither desires nor hates, because it has done with time, and only wishes to gaze upon some reality.' ¹

§

Yeats's theories and beliefs have given us Yeats, the greatest poet of the contemporary world: but he is a lonely genius, and all lovers of both poetry and the drama welcome the different development of the younger modern poets. This development has been in the opposite direction. Instead of rarefying their drama, they have simplified their poetry, and are working towards perfecting it as an instrument of a dramatic vision, much in the same way in which the Greeks and the Elizabethans did.

'Pure poetry' today, the poetry which deals with the quintessential life of the individual poet, inevitably becomes obscure. It lives in the subconscious and unconscious as well as in the conscious world of the poet's mind, and the mood of 'inspiration'—always a condition of half-trance—perpetuates itself in sequences and associations of symbol, image and experience which are, as often as not, purely personal and private. The result is a poetry which, however interesting as sound pattern, or stimulant to vague emotion, cannot communicate itself intellectually to the reader. Its spirit, too, has matched its method. It has been the poetry written by young men who have felt themselves alive in an age of profound social disintegration and despair. To the natural criticism leveled against their general obscurity, the poets have replied that they must be faithful to the truth of individual vision, even if it is a disintegrated vision: "These fragments have I shored against my ruins."

But the mature poet, just like any other mature person,

¹ *The Cutting of an Agate.*

if he be worth anything, does not remain in a state of emotional chaos in the midst of a society he feels to be hostile and evil. He knows the urgent need of establishing some satisfactory relationship, mental and emotional, between himself and the world he inhabits, and his whole nature works all the time, consciously and unconsciously, towards that end. He may emerge, as Yeats emerged long since, into a belief that the only hope for the poet is to withdraw himself into the fastness of his own spiritual world of reality, or he may emerge, as Eliot and Auden and others have now emerged, into a widening of the scope of their poetic art to include a general human and social philosophy as well as a personal catharsis.

The fact that Auden places his fables in the midst of the modern social scene does not, of course, contradict the statement that the poet-dramatist withdraws himself from a direct representation of that scene. The reality of his plays is concerned with parables and generalizations very much larger than their immediate environment, just as *Winterset*, too, enlarges a melodrama of the New York underworld into something which leaves the audience thinking of the universal more than the particular. Auden's *The Dog Beneath the Skin*, indeed, illustrates the extreme difficulty of serious poetry choosing immediate social satire as its theme. The serious choruses, which were a most vivid creation of the modern social, human and physical background seen through a very sensitive and vital spirit, quite failed to fuse with the Aristophanic type of burlesque action and the somewhat cheap satire of the rest of the play. MacLeish's *Panic* made the same difficulty apparent, and obstinately refused to enlarge itself into the poetic world of a more ample permanence. In *The Ascent of F6*, however, Auden has made the parable behind the action strong enough and pervasive

enough to withdraw the whole story from any immediate social scene, and the stylized backgrounds emphasize this as well.

§

Yeats describes in one of his essays how the poetic dramatist is like an old peasant telling stories of the great famine in Ireland, or of the hangings of '98, or spinning tales from his own memories.

He has felt something in the depths of his mind and he wants to make it as visible and powerful to our senses as possible. He will use the most extravagant words and illustrations if they suit his purpose. Or he will invent a wild parable, and the more his mind is on fire, or the more creative he is, the less will he look at the outer world or value it for its own sake.

Hence poetic drama is apt to withdraw from the immediate and temporal because its nature is to universalize its themes. It views the present from a distance in order that it may see it in a truer perspective in its relation to the eternal. It is always relating the particular to the general.

Why, she would hang on him,
As if increase of appetite had grown
By what it fed on: and yet, within a month—
Let me not think on't— Frailty, thy name is woman!

And the particular instance here expands until it pervades the whole play. The characters in a poetic drama, too, though they may act and speak with the greatest particularity and individualism, have a trick of passing into a realm where they speak purely as symbols of general human experience. Iago, for instance, who in his own person is not given to extravagances of language, watching his poison

working in Othello, murmurs with the eloquence of a poet of eternal truth,

Not poppy, nor mandragora,
Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world,
Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep
Which thou owedst yesterday.

Or Timon, a distinct personality in the early part of the play, changes into a disembodied force of pure torrential energy of hate as he curses all finite forms back into another Chaos.

§

We may say, therefore, that two characteristics of poetic drama are that it withdraws itself from the immediate social scene, and that it has a tendency to push towards generalizing its themes: but the quality which is of supreme importance in poetic drama is all that is implied in the fact that it is written in poetry.

Poetry is first of all the most rich and vital, the widest and intensest use of language we possess. In it, man can be more fully articulate than in any other form of words; and this is the first aspect of poetry which strikes an audience at a fine poetic play. It is true that something of the same effect can be gained without the actual rhythm of verse, as indeed we get it in a great deal of Shakespeare's prose, but it can only be created when the common language of the people is rich and colored. In the present day, we only hear it in the Irish plays of Synge or O'Casey.

Th' agony I'm in since he left me has thrust away every rough thing he done, an' every unkind word he spoke; only th' blossoms that grew out of our lives are before me now; shakin' their colours before me face, an' breathin' their sweet scent on

every thought springin' up in me mind till, sometimes, Mrs. Gogan, sometimes I think I'm goin' mad!¹

When the poet in *Timon of Athens* declared

I am rapt and cannot cover
The monstrous bulk of this ingratitude
With any size of words,

he proved, as we had suspected before, that he was no true poet! What distinguishes the poet is that he *does* find 'the size of words' which covers every human experience as we feel it should be covered. Human lovers do not talk like *Romeo and Juliet*, but every human lover wishes he could. The poet gives to every emotion, every physical sensation, every idea the words which embody its very pith and essence. It may be a magnificent hyperbole of excess such as that with which Volpone tempts Celia.

See, behold,
What thou art queen of; not in expectation,
As I feed others: but possessed and crowned.
See, here, a rope of pearl; and each more orient
Than the brave Egyptian queen caroused:
Dissolve and drink them. See, a carbuncle,
May put out both the eyes of our St. Mark;
A diamond would have bought Lollia Paulina,
When she came in like starlight, hid with jewels,
That were the spoils of provinces, take these
And wear, and lose them; yet remains an earring
To purchase them again, and this whole state.
A gem but worth a private patrimony,
Is nothing; we will eat such at a meal.
The heads of parrots, tongues of nightingales,
The brains of peacocks and of ostriches,
Shall be our food, and, could we get the phoenix,
Though nature lost her kind, she were our dish.²

¹ *The Plough and the Stars*.

² *Volpone* III, vi.

Or it may be the incarnation of an abstract idea in the revelation of a concrete image:

Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels trumpet-tongued against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind.¹

Above all, it is only in poetry that we can feel that the dignity and grandeur of the human spirit survive its failure and impotence. It is only by the eloquence of his passions that man becomes greater than the fate which overwhelms him, and which proves inexorably his slavery to death.

Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have
Immortal longings in me: now no more
The juice of Egypt's grape shall moist this lip:
Yare, yare, good Iras; quick. Methinks I hear
Antony call; I see him rouse himself
To praise my noble act; I hear him mock
The luck of Caesar, which the gods give men
To excuse their after wrath. Husband, I come:
Now to that name my courage prove my title!
I am fire and air; my other elements
I give to baser life.²

And as with the expansion of emotion and thought, so with its concentration. There is a common idea that prose says things in few words and poetry in many. There is no greater mistake. The whole quality of Desdemona's love is

¹ *Macbeth* I, vii.

² *Antony and Cleopatra* V, ii.

in her simple words, 'I saw Othello's visage in his mind': or again, the flame of passion, the glow of idea, the warmth of physical contact can all be packed into a few lines of poetry.

Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch
Of the ranged empire fall! Here is my space.
Kingdoms are clay: our dungy earth alike
Feeds beast as man: the nobleness of life
Is to do thus. . . .¹

As we can see here, the juxtaposition of image with image, metaphor with metaphor, or simple with complex language, will create a concentrated group of suggestions which can say more than pages of explanatory prose. Take those few lines of Cordelia on Lear asleep; where all the cruelty of her sisters, the pitiful weakness of Lear, and the utter depths of his mental and bodily sufferings are suggested by a few associated pictures and epithets.

Was this a face
To be opposed against the warring winds?
To stand against the deep dread-bolted thunder?
In the most terrible and nimble stroke
Of quick, cross lightning? to watch—poor perdu!—
With this thin helm? Mine enemy's dog,
Though he had bit me, should have stood that night
Against my fire; and wast thou fain, poor father,
To hovel thee with swine and rogues forlorn,
In short and musty straw? ²

§

These are all examples of the general effects of widening and intensifying life which passages of poetry have upon us in the theatre. But it is interesting to try and be more par-

¹ *Antony and Cleopatra* I, i.

² *King Lear* IV, v.

ticular about the ways in which poetry produces these effects, for even apart from the use of metaphoric image, which we have discussed more fully elsewhere,¹ the strength and variety of the methods of poetry are a matter of infinite gradations. Moreover, the problems and the methods of the poet-dramatist shift and vary from age to age. Those of the poets of today, for example, are very different from those of the Elizabethans.

First of all, the effect of poetic drama has its root in the actual rhythm of the spoken verse, and to the Elizabethans this meant blank verse. Elizabethan drama is blank verse drama, it is impossible to think of it apart from the iambic pentameter, just as it is impossible to think of Greek drama apart from the chorus. Blank verse may be used to say

The poison is dispersed through my veins
And boils like Aetna in my frying guts.

or to say

Absent thee from felicity awhile,
And in this harsh world draw thy breath with pain
To tell my story.

But it is universal and ubiquitous. Nevertheless, the individuality of voice which can come through it is amazing. Listen to these two passages on a similar subject. The first is from *The Malcontent* by Marston.

My lords: The heavy action we intend,
Is death and shame, two of the ugliest shapes
That can confound a soul, think, think of it;
I strike but yet like him that gainst stone walls
Directs his shafts, rebounds in his own face,
My Lady's shame is mine, O God 'tis mine.
Therefore I do conjure all secrecy,

¹ See Chapter V.

Let it be as very little as may be; pray ye, as may be!
 Make frightless entrance, salute her with soft eyes,
 Stain naught with blood. . . . O gentlemen,
 God knows I love her, nothing else, but this,
 I am not well. . . .

And the other,

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul:
 Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!
 It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood,
 Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than alabaster.
 Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.
 Put out the light, and then put out the light:
 If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
 I can again thy former light restore,
 Should I repent me: but once put out thy light,
 Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,
 I know not where is that Promethean heat
 That can thy light relume. When I have pluck'd the rose,
 I cannot give it vital growth again,
 It must needs wither: I'll smell it on the tree.
 Ah, balmy breath, that dost almost persuade
 Justice to break her sword! One more, one more. . . .¹

And as in tone, so in movement. Blank verse starts with the thundering rhythmic percussion of Marlowe,

Our quivering lances, shaking in the air,
 And bullets, like Jove's dreadful thunderbolts,
 Enroll'd in flames and fiery smouldering mists,
 Shall threat the gods more than Cyclopian wars:
 And with our sun-bright armour as we march,
 We'll chase the stars from Heaven and dim their eyes
 That stand and muse at our admirèd arms.²

and it ends in a form so free that in speech it is indistinguishable from prose.

¹ *Othello* V, ii.

² *Tamburlaine*.

O might that fire revive the ashes of
This Phoenix, yet the wonder would not be
So great as he was good, and wondered at
For that. His life's example was so true
A practise of religious theory
That her divinity seemed rather the
Description than the instruction of his life.¹

Every possible diversity and variety of blank verse was exploited by the Elizabethans as a dramatic instrument, and as a result the first aim of any modern poet-dramatist is to avoid it. It is inextricably bound up in the consciousness of an audience with the archaic; and it is also associated inevitably with the Elizabethan love of rhetoric, which at its best produced Cleopatra's dying speech, and at its worst a kind of bawling vehemence which is deafening. Drama which is to avoid the extreme ritual formality of the Greeks, and yet remain aloof from prose, must always evolve something approaching a natural speech-tone in its rhythm. Jacobean blank verse did this admirably, but it is no use modern poets echoing the voices of seventeenth-century dramatists: they must find new tones with the rhythms of today. Nor have the dramatists had any difficulty in finding them. Their difficulty has never been in creating verse forms, but in adapting them to dramatic performance. Any poets writing for the stage today are all polished craftsmen as far as the manipulation of words goes, but to make words carry not merely the superficial, but the essential, quality of action and character is another thing. Eliot, for example, has no difficulty in creating the whole linguistic bag of tricks in *Murder in the Cathedral*. A most interesting study could be made of all the varieties of rhymed and unrhymed verse measures he has woven into it, with all the adaptations and

¹ *The Atheist's Tragedy*.

parodies of liturgical forms and other material which he has embodied in the structure; but in spite of all his skill the total pattern remains, I think, mainly intellectual and verbal, not dramatic. The Tempters are subtly varied, the Priests duly vague or grandmotherly, the Knights flippant and Thomas almost monotonously noble and Anglican, but they are as static in their intellectual immobility as Yeats is in his spiritual ivory tower. They are all full of 'abstract and sinewy faculties,' but they have almost no physical and emotional warmth. The same is true of MacLeish's *Panic*, which is full of beautiful elegiac lines, but has no dramatic bite and snap. Auden, feeling, one suspects, the difficulty nowadays of making serious verse carry true speech rhythms in dialogue, has made his characters speak prose whenever the action of the play has to be advanced. They only rise to verse or moments of pause or emphasis when the effect can be more formal.

§

Nowhere, indeed, is Shakespeare more alone among dramatists than in his capacity to create the very essence of the familiar in the rhythms of poetry without the least sense of any incongruity in the medium. He harmonizes the real world and the poet's world as it has never been blended since. This can be admirably illustrated, as Granville Barker illustrates it in his brilliant analysis of the way in which, all through *King Lear*, Shakespeare prevents the universal and symbolic aspects of the play from overwhelming the imagination, by bringing the audience back constantly to the level of common life by reference, gesture, image—a kind of anchoring of the action to the familiar amidst all the passionate convulsions of nature and human-

ity. But it is a faculty as apparent in small effects as in large—in the way, for instance, he will make two soldiers speak of a battle. The soldiers remain soldiers; we never question their reality, but besides creating them unmistakably for what they are, the verse embodies and defines in an unforgettably vivid way both the actual picture of Cleopatra's flight, and the whole flavor of the army's opinion of her and of Antony.

Scarus. Gods and goddesses,

All the whole synod of them!

Enobarbus.

What's thy passion?

Scarus. The greater candle ¹ of the world is lost

With very ignorance; we have kissed away
Kingdoms and provinces.

Enobarbus.

How appears the fight?

Scarus. On our side like the token'd pestilence,²

Where death is sure. Yon ribaudred ³ nag of Egypt—
Whom leprosy o'ertake!—i' the midst o' the fight,
When vantage like a pair of twins appear'd,
Both as the same, or rather ours the elder,—
The breese ⁴ upon her, like a cow in June.—
Hoists sails and flies.

Enobarbus. That I beheld:

Mine eyes did sicken at the sight, and could not
Endure a further view.

Scarus.

She once being loof'd ⁵

The noble ruin of her magic, Antony,
Claps on his sea-wing, and like a doting mallard,
Leaving the flight in height, flies after her:
I never saw an action of such shame;
Experience, manhood, honour, ne'er before
Did violate so itself.

¹ piece.

² the plague.

³ lewd.

⁴ gadfly.

⁵ luffed.

That is a marvelous concentration of real poetry and real life. The men themselves, their station suggested by their use of common country terms; their scorn and anger and sense of outrage, leaping out from the words, with the contemptuous parallel pictures of Cleopatra kicking up her heels and bolting like a cow stung by a gadfly, and Antony flying after her like any doting duck. Or to take another small example, could any pair of unemployed men of today express the truth about themselves more tersely and more precisely than by the little speeches of the two murderers in *Macbeth*?

Second Murderer. I am one, my liege,
Whom the vile blows and buffets of the world
Have so incensed that I am reckless what
I do to spite the world.

First Murderer. And I another
So weary with disasters, tugg'd with fortune,
That I would set my life on any chance,
To mend it or be rid on't.

§

This is a digression, however, and we must get back to the discussion of the ways in which poetry can produce effects which hold our attention in the theatre. I say in the theatre, because there are many poetic dramas which sound quite impressive to the reader and fail to live at all when they are translated into terms of the stage: the plays of Gordon Bottomley are an example. For the purpose of orderly discussion, it is perhaps permissible here to divide, rather crudely, the aims before the dramatist into the direct creation of character in action, and all those effects of atmosphere and background, character contrast and grouping, of pattern and

movement on which the depth and vitality of drama depend.

The creation of direct action in poetry is partly a matter of the production of those speech-tones we have been talking of; but not of them only. Action can be as vividly created in the poetry of soliloquy as anywhere else. The movements of Hamlet's mind, or the frenzied imaginings of Macbeth, have as much action in them as any battlefield. In Shakespeare, indeed, rhetoric often becomes functional and *is* the drama. When Timon says,

Come not to me again: but say to Athens,
Timon hath made his everlasting mansion
Upon the beachèd verge of the salt flood;
Who once a day with his embossèd froth
The turbulent surge shall cover. . . .

it is the words themselves which are dramatic; the character has, as it were, been left behind. But poetry can be absolutely dramatic in the exact sense of revealing character in action in a way which is swifter and more concentrated than prose. It can, for instance, give the very sense of the sudden jumps, the ellipses and jerky associations of images and arguments, which are the actual process of thought.

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly: if the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch,
With his surcease, success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases
We still have judgment here; that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which being taught return
To plague the inventor. . . .¹

¹ *Macbeth* I, vii.

Or it can create a sequence of moods, passing from courage which first expresses itself in a grim jesting at fate, then passes into a sudden nervous spasm which breaks through control, and is quickly covered again by a resumption of it.

Bosola. Doth not death fright you?

Duchess. Who would be afraid on't,

Knowing to meet such excellent company

In the other world?

Bosola. Yet methinks,

The manner of your death should much afflict you:

This cord should terrify you.

Duchess. Not a whit:

What would it pleasure me to have my throat cut

With diamonds? or to be smothered

With cassia? or to be shot to death with pearls?

I know death hath ten thousand several doors

For men to take their exits; and 'tis found

They go on such strange geometrical hinges,

You may open them both ways; *any way, for Heaven's sake*

So I were out of your whispering. Tell my brothers

That I perceive death, now I am well awake,

Best gift is they can give or I can take.

I would fain put off my last woman's fault,

I'd not be tedious with you.

Executioner. We are ready.

Duchess. Dispose my breath how please you; but my body

Bestow upon my women, will you? ¹

The moderns have one effect of creating mood and 'tone' in character creation which is all their own. Just as some of the pleasure of listeners to Sullivan's scores in the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas is in noting his parodies and adaptations of classical composers, so the modern poets will convey a criticism, and hence obliquely obtain a creative effect, by echoing the past. Eliot suggests the spirit of blasphemy

¹ *The Duchess of Malfi* IV, i.

which animates the murderers of Becket by making them burst in, drunk, before the murder, hiccuping out alternate lines of a revivalist hymn and a Negro spiritual.

Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?
Are you marked with the mark of the beast?
Come down David to the lion's den,
Come down David and join the feast.

Or Auden implies the sentimental falsity of the mother who is the root of Ransom's failure, by making her speak in lines of Tennysonian mushiness.

May not a mother come at once to bring
Her only gift, her love? When the news came,
I was in bed, for lately
I've not been very well. But what's a headache
When I can stand beside my son and see him
In the hour of his triumph?

Auden embodies, too, the effort of Ransom to nerve himself for his final assault on the peak, and perhaps, also, the sense of the turmoil in Ransom's mind from his knowledge of his own mixed motives in undertaking the quest—his feeling that there is something 'false within,' and his instinct, therefore, to bolster up his own self-esteem—by making him burst out after Gunn's death into a passage of pure Shakespearean rant.

O senseless hurricanes,
That waste yourselves upon the unvexed rock,
Find some employment proper to your powers,
Press on the neck of Man your murdering thumbs
And earn real gratitude! Astrologers,
Can you not scold the fated loitering star
To run to its collision and our end? . . .

Is Death so busy
That we must fidget in a draughty world

That's stale and tasteless; must we still kick our heels
And wait for his obsequious secretaries
To page Mankind at last and lead him
To the distinguished Presence?

§

Language is so all-important to drama, because not only does the script of a play present a story and the group of people who take part in it, but it creates everything we know as to the *quality* of that story and those people; everything we have called elsewhere the 'spatial' elements in a play. A novelist can make his characters speak with the nonde-script vacuity of the average man or woman. It does not matter if his characters use the 'pallid and joyless' language of real life, for he can himself, by analysis, comment and description, point out wherein they really vary from the commonplace, so that it is the direct coloring and quality of the *novelist's* mind which create the total effect upon the reader. But the dramatist has no such help. He cannot intervene in his own person. Everything he wishes to convey in the way of individuality, of the development and shift of personal relationships, of thought processes, of comment of his own, of undercurrent and overtone, has to be created by him in terms of language or gesture, of pause or movement. Nowadays, in prose drama, where everyone speaks a dead level of poverty-stricken realistic dialogue, all creation of character, tone, and variety of emotional value is forced into stage directions, which become ever more novelistic and explanatory, and all interpretation of such things on the stage itself must be left entirely to the abilities of the actor. But in really creative stage writing, the words are quite as important as the acting. There are very few stage directions in Shakespeare, for the actors did not need to *define* the

quality of the feeling, they only had to *express* clearly what was already defined in the words. The part of Cleopatra, for instance, is not a medium for the exercise of sex appeal by a talented actress, it is a temperament created in *words*: a study, not of the infinite monotony of physical seduction, but of the infinite variety of change and gradation of mood in a courtesan of genius. Poetic drama is not like life. Its creators courageously make life in it far more alive and articulate than it is in reality, by allowing soliloquy and rhetoric to their characters, and by coloring their language with every device which shall expand and enrich its meanings and messages to a sensitive audience.

There is, first of all, the effect of the sheer beauty of words and rhythms—the poetry which Logan Pearsall Smith describes as simply kidnaping us into heaven.

Unarm, Eros, the long day's task is done,
And we must sleep.¹

For he is like to something I remember
A great while since, a long, long time ago.²

O God! O God! that it were possible
To undo things done; to call back yesterday.³

And all the exquisite passages of descriptive beauty which Shakespeare and other poets use to create their backgrounds, to evoke their atmosphere, or simply for the sheer delight of playing with the chime of words and striking music from them.

Zenocrate, lovelier than the love of Jove,
Brighter than is the silver Rhodope,
Fairer than whitest snow on Scythian hills. . . .

¹ *Antony and Cleopatra*.

² *The Lover's Melancholy*. (Ford).

³ *A Woman Killed with Kindness*. (Heywood).

Modern poets are not much interested in the obvious music and melody of verse, but they are very skillful in concentrating the human quality of a scene in its poetic use of language. Eliot, for example, accomplishes this very brilliantly in the fragment of an Agon in *Sweeney Agonistes*, and the stylized Mr. and Mrs. A. in *The Ascent of F6* are the essence of suburbia embodied in verse. Throughout the play their vocabulary, the conventional rhythms in which they speak, their descriptions of their lives, their pleasures, their dreams, and their comments on the adventure, generalize and satirize the entire class of which they are typical. They are a dramatic effect created entirely by language. To turn to a very different example of how the use of language defines mood and tone, take the character of Othello. Until Iago's poison starts working in his veins, Othello lives by his two great positive faiths—love and war. These harmonize his life completely, and all the language in which he expresses himself is the perfection of controlled, musical and noble rhythms, colored by clear visual images drawn from his two guiding passions. He is a nature perfectly at peace with itself. When he meets Desdemona at Cyprus his soul's content is 'absolute.' Next day he is saying,

Perdition catch my soul,
But I do love thee! and when I love thee not,
Chaos is come again.

and a little later,

O, now for ever
Farewell the tranquil mind! farewell content!
Farewell the plumed troop and the big wars
That make ambition virtue!

His two absolute values have been swept out of his mind. Chaos is come again, and from then until the scene of the murder he is a different creature and he speaks a different

language. Disintegration replaces harmony: he swings jerkily between love and hatred, and ugly idiot ravings replace his swelling verse. Every suggestion of foulness and darkness leaps to his tongue: he'll tear her to pieces, he'll chop her into messes; death and damnation and blood, blood, blood, is all he can think of, and gross animal images, 'as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys'; pictures of foul toads knotting and gendering in a cistern, of summer flies breeding in a shambles, of heaven stopping its nose, and the moon winking at her shame. Desdemona is a lewd minx, a subtle whore, an impudent strumpet.

But this horrible change does not last. Othello does not even kill her when it is upon him. In the death scene, the character of his speech is again controlled. His mind no longer jerks and raves. 'Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men,' is a reasoned attitude, not a bestial fury. All her beauty and sweetness are incarnated in a series of exquisite images of snow and alabaster, of flame and light, of roses and perfume. The accusations of the actual moments of killing are the agony of a man 'perplexed in the extreme,' of 'an honourable murderer,' not the ragings of a horrible beast; and when it is all over, it is the music of the Othello of the first act in which he takes his leave, as the nobleness and simplicity of his essential nature reassert themselves.

§

Finally, the poetic effects of verse drama depend, as we have seen that all dramatic effects depend, on movement and variety. Yeats says that when he first began to rehearse plays he was under the influence of his own early poetry, and made the mistake of insisting upon an obvious all-pervading rhythm. He soon realized the deadening effect of

this on stage movement, as well as on the architectonics of verse—just as Marlowe realized it, and Shakespeare himself. All fine poetic drama works away from regularity towards constant variation and diversity, towards a freedom where the approaches to ordinary speech-tones and the withdrawals from them to a more formal or colored language all have human and artistic significance.

The Greeks found their great instrument for this in the chorus. It is impossible to read Greek drama, even in inadequate translations, without seeing and feeling the uses to which the tragedians put it in creating relief, suspense, contrast and changes of pace and tone. It is clear that Eliot intended the chorus to play the same sort of part in *Murder in the Cathedral*, but it is a little hard to distinguish clearly his intention. Eliot the metaphysical poet seems to have conquered Eliot the dramatist. In so far as the women are symbols of 'the poor' and so in contrast with the worlds of politics, intrigue and the aristocracy, the meaning is clear, and their talk of the important things in their lives, food and drink, crops and weather, business and fireside, births, deaths and marriages, brings a welcome spirit of dailiness into the high abstractions of Thomas and the world of his temptations. Their sense of impending doom, too, though a little obvious, is creative in the dramatic pattern. But their cry for 'the small folk drawn into the pattern of fate' remains quite unrealized as a concept in the action, and it seems surely out of any general or particular character they are supposed to have, that a body who emphasize so often that their scope is very limited, 'living and partly living,' and that they are 'a type of the common man,' should be endowed with such profound metaphysical insight into the identity of the individual with the whole intellectual,

spiritual and physical activity of the universe, and with all their author's own complexity and subtlety of mind.

Eliot's failure here, if it be a failure, is part of the dramatic weakness of the whole play, but whatever we may happen to feel about that aspect of his work, it is impossible not to enjoy the poetic versatility of it all. Whatever the action or the ideas may be, the verse is never dull. Take the passage at the end of the first act where the Chorus, the Tempters, the Priests and Thomas himself are all present. The dramatic clash and conflict is presented purely verbally and intellectually, in the texture of the verse, in rhyme, in rhythm and in the jostling of different vocabularies, but it is extraordinarily skillfully done. The Chorus voice the sense of coming disaster.

I hear restless movement of feet. And the air is heavy and thick.
Thick and heavy the sky. And the earth presses up beneath my
feet.

What is the sickly smell, the vapour?

The Tempters chant irreverently how man's life is a cheat
and a disappointment from first to last.

The Catherine wheel, the pantomime cat,
The prizes given at the children's party,
The prize awarded for the English Essay,
The scholar's degree, the statesman's decoration. . . .

The Priests intone their anxious platitudes,

O Thomas my Lord do not fight the intractable tide,
Do not sail the irresistible wind. . . .

Then the three views join and whirl in alternate lines, in a spinning Catherine wheel of words and images, and finally Thomas clinches his conclusions in a passage of rhyme.

It is the verse management of a virtuoso, but it is all a little like a brilliant performance at the circus. For really warm living illustrations of effects of movement created by the use of language, we find ourselves back at the Elizabethans. The nearest approach to the use of the chorus for this purpose is the Elizabethan love of songs, which are constantly introduced to suggest and confirm an emotional 'tone' which the dialogue creates more lightly. Desdemona's willow song adds still more pathos to her unwitting preparations for death, or Cornelia's mad dirge over Marcello's corpse in Webster's *The White Devil*, 'Call for the robin-redbreast and the wren,' gives a moment of musical relief from the enveloping horror of evil humanity in that play, and provokes Flamineo's confession,

I have a strange thing in me, to the which
I cannot give a name, without it be
Compassion.

But throughout later Elizabethan plays, changes of rhythm, slow and swift, simple or complicated, really seem to influence the heart-beat of the spectator, and his breathing. There is the moment when Cleopatra, after the scene when she has been kindly but unmistakably patronized by Caesar, meekly bids him farewell as 'My master and my lord,' and the moment he is out of the room turns furiously to her women,

He words me, girls, he words me, that I should not
Be noble to myself: but hark thee, Charmian. . . .

Or that scene in *The Duchess of Malfi* where the Duchess, after a passage of charming domestic banter with Antonio, thinks he is still in the room, and goes on talking to him in

the key of gentle raillery. Ferdinand, coming in behind, overhears her, and thus learns the secret of her marriage. The character of the dialogue changes at once from gaiety to horror, the speed quickening to a kind of panting and hurried intensity. Or there is that moment later in the same play, when in the midst of the plots and counterplots, murders and blood, Ferdinand enters alone, and a pause of complete stillness falls as he whispers, 'Strangling is a very quiet death.'

Sometimes the effects are caused by the shift from a rich and complex expression to the utmost simplicity. Shakespeare gains as many of his great moments by the very simplest and quietest language as by rhetoric, splendor and elaboration. The death of Othello is magnificent, but not more moving than that of Lear with his sublime bathos of 'Pray you, undo this button.' Nothing is more poignant in Hamlet than the way he lets drop, almost inconsequently, to Horatio, 'Thou would'st not think how ill all's here about my heart: but it is no matter.' Nor is there any moment more superb in any play than the death of Cleopatra, when perfect simplicity succeeds and transcends all complexities, when perfect stillness succeeds and transcends all grandeur, and concludes and resolves one of the greatest poetic and dramatic harmonies of the world. She takes the asp.

Cleopatra. Come, thou mortal wretch,
With thy sharp teeth this knot intrinsic
Of life at once untie: poor venomous fool,
Be angry and dispatch. O could'st thou speak,
That I might hear thee call great Caesar ass
Unpoliced!

Charmian. O eastern star!

Cleopatra.

Peace, peace!

Dost thou not see my baby at my breast,
That sucks the nurse asleep?

Charmian.

O break! O break!

Cleopatra. As sweet as balm, as soft as air, as gentle,—

O Antony!—

INDEX

INDEX

- Adding Machine, The*, 28, 131
Advancement of Learning, The, 216
 Aeschylus, 36, 39, 41, 43, 44, 45, 46 f., 49, 56, 57, 182 f., 184, 185, 187, 200, 205
Agamemnon, 47, 55
A la Recherche du Temps Perdu, 17
Alchemist, The, 138, 152
 Alleyn, Edward, 65
All Fools, 139
All's Well That Ends Well, 32, 80
 Anderson, Maxwell, 91, 105, 209, 214
 Andrewes, Lancelot, 86
Antigone, 207
Antonio's Revenge, 64
Antony and Cleopatra, 21, 37, 69, 79, 118, 132 ff., 205 f., 225, 226, 237
Arcadia, 84
 Aristophanes, 43, 58, 149
 Aristotle, 46, 55, 173, 174, 176 f., 178, 188, 204
Ars Poetica, 50
Art of the Drama, The, 200
Ascent of F6, The, 168, 199, 209 ff., 221 f., 238
As You Like It, 145, 147
Atheist's Tragedy, The, 189, 194, 229
 Auden, W. H., 27, 91, 129, 199, 209 f., 221, 230, 235 f.
Awake and Sing, 28, 29, 121, 141, 171
 Baker, Professor G. P., 29
 Barker, Granville, 25, 27, 78 f., 91, 163, 230
 Barrie, J. M., 148, 165
 Beaumont, Francis, 74, 165
 Behrman, S. N., 31, 91, 158
 Bentley, G. E., 200
 Bernard, Jean Jacques, 18
 Blake, William, 143
 Bottomley, Gordon, 232
Bourgeois Gentleman, Le, 144
Boy Meets Girl, 147, 171
 Bradbrook, M. C., 82 note
 Bradley, A. C., 133, 135, 173
Broken Heart, The, 191, 193
 Bunyan, John, 155
 Burbage, Richard, 65
Byron's Tragedy, 79, 189
Call It A Day, 97
Case Is Altered, The, 63
Cat and the Moon, The, 219
Cenci, The, 212
Changeling, The, 195

- Chapman, George, 79, 97, 189,
 192, 193, 207
 Chaucer, Geoffrey, 83, 173
 Chekov, Anton, 11, 14, 15, 16,
 28, 29, 95, 103, 114, 118, 120 f.,
 164, 198 f.
Cherry Orchard, The, 120 f., 147,
 164, 169, 170
Children of Heracles, The, 58
Children's Hour, The, 30 f.
 Cicero, 46
 Collier, Jeremy, 157
 Condell, Henry, 65
 Congreve, William, 112, 157,
 159, 161, 162, 170
Country Wife, The, 141, 145 f.,
 156 f., 168
 Coward, Noel, 91, 103, 144, 158
Crime and Punishment, 18
 Cumberland, Richard, 163
Cutting of an Agate, The, 129,
 187, 220
Dead End, 105
Dear Brutus, 148
 Dekker, Thomas, 63, 71, 74, 84,
 97, 165
 Demosthenes, 55
Desire under the Elms, 177
Devil's Disciple, The, 33
Doctor's Dilemma, The, 168,
 169, 170
Dog Beneath the Skin, The, 27,
 221
Doll's House, The, 24
Don Juan, 148
 Donne, John, 65, 86
 Dostoievsky, Fyodor, 18
Double Dealer, The, 141
Dramatic Opinions and Essays,
 91, 197
Dr. Bernhardt, 26
Dr. Faustus, 21, 71
 Dryden, John, 16, 36, 94, 139,
 143, 173
Duchess of Melfi, The, 71, 120,
 191, 234, 242 f.
 Duhamel, Georges, 96
 Duke Orsino, 71
Dunciad, The, 161
 Earl of Pembroke, 65
Electra, 35, 39
 Eliot, T. S., 91, 97, 118, 129, 183,
 185, 207, 208, 209, 214, 221,
 229, 234 f., 238, 240 f.
 Ellis-Fermor, U. M., 119 note,
 133, 189 note
End of Summer, 31 f.
Eumenides, 49, 183, 201
Euphues, 84
 Euripides, 26, 35, 41, 43, 44, 49 f.,
 53 ff., 56 f., 58, 59, 173, 184 f.,
 186
Every Man out of his Humour,
 143, 149
Faerie Queene, The, 84
Father, The, 174, 200, 204
 Fielding, Henry, 148
 Fletcher, John, 74, 165
 Ford, John, 237
Fortnightly Review, The, 152
Fragment of a Greek Tragedy,
 40
 Freytag, Gustav, 173
Frogs, The, 147
 Galsworthy, John, 61, 91, 120,
 199
 Geddes, Norman-Bel, 99
Gentleman's Magazine, The,
 162 f.
Ghosts, 24, 36, 168, 169, 174, 177

- Gilbert, W. S., 139, 163, 234
 Goldsmith, Oliver, 161, 162
 Gordon, George, 83 note
Great God Brown, The, 18
Gull's Hornbook, The, 63
- Hamlet*, 16, 28, 38, 61 f., 68, 75 f., 102, 104, 134, 179, 206, 207
- Hankin, St. John, 164
Hawk's Well, The, 219
Hay Fever, 22, 28, 144
 Hazlitt, William, 150, 161
Hedda Gabler, 24, 25, 122 ff.
 Hegel, G. W. F., 173
 Hellman, Lillian, 30
 Heming, John, 65
Henry V, 86
 Herbert, A. P., 75
 Heywood, Thomas, 237
Hippolytus, 49
 Horace, 50
 Houghton, Norris, 11
 Houghton, Stanley, 164
 Housman, A. E., 40
- Ibsen, Henrik, 21, 24, 26, 29, 36, 39, 55, 61, 70, 122, 128, 129, 179, 195, 203, 209
Importance of Being Earnest, The, 143, 146
Ion, 50
Iphigenia in Tauris, 50
 Isherwood, Christopher, 27, 199, 209 f.
- Jacobean Drama, The*, 119 note, 189 note
 James, Henry, 18, 24
John Gabriel Borkman, 21, 36
 Johnson, Samuel, 85 f., 157, 192
 Johnston, Denis, 91, 164
- Jones, Henry Arthur, 163
 Jonson, Ben, 63 f., 76, 83 note, 97, 133, 138, 143, 148 ff., 164, 166, 170
Julius Caesar, 68, 113 f.
Justice, 28, 174, 204
- Kempe, Will, 65
King Lear, 27, 37, 64, 68, 133, 135, 205, 226, 230
 Kingsley, Sidney, 105
Kiss for Cinderella, A, 168
Knight of the Burning Pestle, The, 63
 Knight, G. Wilson, 119 note, 133
 Komisarjevsky, Theodore, 11
 Kyd, Thomas, 97
- Lamb, Charles, 157 f.
L'Avare, 151
 Lessing, G. E., 173
Letter to a Young Poet, 98
Libation-Bearers, 36, 43
Libel, 97
 Linklater, Eric, 138
Lover's Melancholy, The, 237
Love's Labour's Lost, 118
Loyalties, 120
 Lucas, F. L., 50
Lysistrata, 58, 59
- Macaulay, Thomas B., 156 f.
Macbeth, 21, 28, 37, 71, 132, 134 f., 205 f., 225, 233
 MacLeish, Archibald, 131, 221, 230
 Maeterlinck, Maurice, 112, 212 f.
Major Barbara, 147, 169
Malcontent, The, 227 f.
Man and Superman, 170
 Marlowe, Christopher, 78, 185 ff., 188, 228, 240

- Marston, John, 64, 227
 Masfield, John, 213
Masses and Man, 27, 130, 131
Master Builder, The, 128, 199
 Maugham, Somerset, 91, 158
Measure for Measure, 32, 72, 132,
 172, 191
Medea, 34, 44
Merchant of Venice, The, 146,
 172
 Meredith, George, 147, 151, 156,
 157
 Middleton, Thomas, 67, 195
Midsummer Night's Dream, A,
 167
 Millett, F. B., 200
Misanthrope, Le, 145
 Molière, J. B., 103, 144, 145, 148,
 150, 156, 161, 162
Moon in the Yellow River, The,
 164, 170
 Moore, George, 152 f.
 Moryson, Fynes, 77
Moscow Rehearsals, 11
Mourning Becomes Electra,
 200 f.
Much Ado About Nothing, 172
Murder in the Cathedral, 29,
 183 f., 208, 214 f., 229 f., 240 ff.
 Murray, Gilbert, 54

Nan, 213
 Nathan, George Jean, 19
 Nietzsche, Friedrich, 173
Night Must Fall, 97
Noah, 129

 Obey, André, 129
Obiter Scripta, 181
 O'Casey, Sean, 91, 97, 199, 223
 Odets, Clifford, 91, 97, 114 ff.,
 121, 131, 199, 209

Oedipus Rex, 44
Oedipus Tyrannus, 204
 O'Neill, Eugene, 18, 91, 129, 177,
 192, 200 f., 209
Oresteia, 45, 192, 205
Orestes, 26
Othello, 71, 75, 80, 133, 168, 191,
 206 f., 228

Panic, 131, 221, 230
Paolo and Francesca, 213
 Paumgartner, Balthasar, 77
 Pepys, Samuel, 167
 Pericles, 56
 Phillips, Stephen, 213
 Pinero, Arthur Wing, 163
 Pirandello, Luigi, 32
 Plato, 204
Plays and Controversies, 180
Plough and the Stars, The, 140,
 199, 224
Poetaster, The, 83 note
Poetics, 55
Prefaces to Shakespeare, 27
Prometheus, 183
 Proust, Marcel, 17, 35, 116

 Racine, J. B., 70
Ralph Roister-Doister, 139
Reunion in Vienna, 103
Revenge's Tragedy, The, 189,
 191
 Rhenanus, Johannes, 77
 Rice, Elmer, 91, 199, 209
Richard III, 77, 78
Riders to the Sea, 112
Rivals, The, 146
Romeo and Juliet, 78, 133, 191,
 224
Rosmersholm, 25, 26, 203
 Rylands, George, 133

- St. Joan*, 26, 28, 35, 120, 199
 Santayana, George, 181, 182
 Schlegel, Friedrich, 173
 Schnitzler, Arthur, 26
School for Scandal, The, 146, 162 f.
Seagull, The, 16, 110
Second Mrs. Tanqueray, The, 23 f.
 Seneca, 185
 Shakespeare, William, 16, 23, 25, 27, 30, 32, 36, 37, 61, 64, 65, 66, 68, 71, 76, 77 ff., 83, 85 ff., 103, 104, 114, 117 f., 120, 132 f., 134, 143 f., 147, 159, 166 ff., 169, 170, 172, 179, 188, 192, 195 ff., 205, 207, 214, 218, 223, 230 f., 235, 236 f., 240, 243
Shakespeare's English, 83 note.
 Shaw, G. B., 26, 36, 91, 92, 110, 120, 137, 147, 148 ff., 152 ff., 164, 169, 170, 180, 197, 199, 208
 Shelley, Percy Bysshe, 212
 Sheridan, Richard Brinsley, 161, 162, 163
She Stoops to Conquer, 161
Shoemaker's Holiday, 165
 Sidney, Philip, 186
Silver Box, The, 121, 178
 Simonson, Lee, 100
Six Characters in Search of an Author, 32
 Smith, Logan Pearsall, 237
 Socrates, 57
 Sophocles, 39, 41, 43, 44, 56, 57, 173, 184, 187, 200
Spanish Tragedy, 97
Spook Sonata, The, 117
 Spurgeon, Professor Caroline, 133
Strange Interlude, 28, 201
 Strindberg, August, 116, 200
 Sullivan, A. S., 163, 234
Suppliants, The, 49
Suppliant Women, The, 58
Sweeney Agonistes, 238
 Swift, Jonathan, 98
 Synge, J. M., 91, 112, 216, 223
Tamburlaine, 186, 228
Taming of the Shrew, The, 22
Tempest, The, 23, 171
Theatre Arts Monthly, 99
Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy, 82 note
Thirty-nine Steps, The, 18
Three Plays for Puritans, 110, 180
Three Sisters, The, 28, 118, 174, 204
Timon of Athens, 224
Titus Andronicus, 64
 Toller, Ernst, 27, 130, 199
 Tourneur, Cyril, 189
Tragedy, 50
Tragic Theatre, The, 217
Trials of Topsy, The, 75
Troilus and Cressida, 23, 120, 190, 195 ff., 206
Trojan Women, The, 25, 58 f., 178, 204
Twelfth Night, 84, 132, 139, 141, 143, 146
Two Gentlemen of Verona, The, 139
Uncle Vanya, 168, 169, 174
 Vanbrugh, John, 157
Volpone, 133, 139, 145, 146, 147, 150 ff., 168, 169, 224

- Waiting for Lefty*, 131
Way of the World, The, 22, 28,
 143, 147, 161
 Webster, John, 64, 88, 120, 189,
 242
Well of the Saints, The, 216
West Indian, The, 163
Wheel of Fire, The, 119 note
White Devil, The, 72 f., 242
Widowers' Houses, 153
Wild Duck, The, 24, 28, 35, 145,
 204
 Wilde, Oscar, 112, 163
 Wilson, Professor Dover, 32,
 75 f.
Winterset, 28, 105 ff., 204, 207,
 214 f., 221
Woman Killed with Kindness,
A, 237
Women Beware Women, 67
 Woolf, Virginia, 116
 Wycherley, William, 157, 159,
 167
 Yeats, W. B., 91, 129, 180, 187,
 213, 216 ff., 222, 230, 239 f.

